

# Marriage Equality Time: Entanglements of sexual progress and childhood innocence in Irish primary schools

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## Abstract

Ireland is a majority-Catholic country that has, in recent times, been held up as a model of sexual progress internationally. We employ the term *Marriage Equality Time* (MET) to signify the tensions related to temporality, sexuality and children that emerged as Marriage Equality (ME) was introduced in Ireland. Drawing on a study with six primary schools during the ME referendum, this article captures MET in its emergent state, exploring how parents, teachers and principals were processing what ME might mean for children and schools. This analysis of MET illustrates how it mediates imaginaries of childhood innocence, sexuality and the nation-state.

## Keywords

Childhood innocence, marriage equality, primary schools, queer temporality, sexual progressivism

## Introduction

Timelines of sexual progress have positioned some nation-states as backward and others as advanced based on whether they have introduced ‘Marriage Equality’ (ME). For instance, in Ireland, in the lead up to the ME referendum in May 2015, government and mainstream political support for ME invoked a vision of Ireland as an advanced, modern nation free from its conservative, religious past

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(Neary, 2016). Announcing the passing of the referendum, Amnesty International noted that the sexual progressivism inherent in the passage of the referendum would have an impact beyond Irish borders: 'It will obviously have profound significance to people here in Ireland, but it will also echo around the world. It sends a message to LGBTI people everywhere that they, their relationships and their families matter' (Amnesty International, 2015). Indeed, Australian commentators frequently referenced the Irish experience in arguing for ME. For example, Carol Johnson (2015), in a piece in *The Conversation* entitled 'Why Australia is so far behind the times on same-sex marriage', observes: 'Ireland's recent constitutional referendum vote in favour [of ME] makes Australia look particularly backward in comparison with most other developed, English-speaking countries'.

However, such narratives of progress are not straightforward and beg further inquiry. For instance, in an introduction to an analysis of a survey of LGBT+ young people, commissioned by BeLonGTo and GCN (2017: 1) and entitled *Budding Burning Issues: The Issues Facing Ireland's LGBT+ Young People*, Brian Finnegan argues that while the 'referendum vote in 2015 gave the impression of an Ireland that had become, in the majority, accepting of its lesbian and gay citizens... the young people who responded to our survey spoke of a lack of acceptance, both in their families and wider society, and particularly in their schools'.

These survey results speak to young people's sense that imaginaries of progress in Ireland were not fitting with their own expectations of what progress might look like. Such uneven narratives of progress point to the production of what we are calling *Marriage Equality Time* (MET). For us, MET is not inherently progressive or conservative, transforming or conforming. Furthermore, MET might be affiliated with, but is not limited to, progress, delay, backwardness, readiness and innocence. The value of MET is as a heuristic; enabling us to notice the ways in which ME has become a shorthand for sexual progress and facilitating inquiry into how relations between 'the child', the nation, sexuality, schooling and temporality are being newly mediated as ME emerges.

The figure of the child has been central to the production of MET. In public debates about ME in many contexts, the emblem of the child has been conjured in different ways by proponents and opponents of ME (Polikoff, 2005). Conceptualizations of the child as *ready for ME* (because children are naturally progressive), *protected by ME* (because of ME's symbolic reach) or *in need of protection from ME* (because children are innocent and easily suggestible) are all pivotal in the production of MET. In Ireland, Tanya Ward, chief executive of the Children's Rights Alliance in Ireland, noted:

Voting yes will send a really powerful message to every child in Ireland, to all the LGBT children in Ireland today that they belong, that they are respected and that if they choose to get married and live with someone and commit themselves for the rest of their lives to that person that that choice and that relationship will be valued and respected. (Ward cited in Carr, 2015)

Ward draws readers' attention to the benefits that would be bestowed on children with the passing of the referendum, but, at least in this quotation, the benefits highlighted are those that young people would accrue when they are older – when they may choose to be monogamous and married. These messages, often evoked by supporters of ME, flow under the banner of sexual progressiveness but this vision of sexual progress has its limits. It reinforces presumptions of childhood innocence by deferring imaginings of LGBT children's sexuality to adulthood when the children of today might choose to marry and live in a committed relationship. Such pronouncements avoid the topic of child and adolescent sexuality but they also reproduce a homonormative pathway to adulthood for queer children and fail to account for the diversity of kinship formations that exist.

The figure of the child was also continuously invoked by the 'No' campaign. Arguments such as those of Michael Neary, Archbishop of Tuam, echoed through public debates:

One of the most important and fundamental questions that each of us has to consider is the rights of the child . . . We should be aware of what is at stake here. We are in fact redefining the family. Throughout history and across all cultures, marriage has been consistently understood to be the union of male and female with procreative potential. (*The Journal*, 2015)

Underlined here is the emblem of the child in need of protection because of ME's capacity to change the definition of the family. This need for protection was reiterated by Brendan Leahy, Bishop of Limerick, in a letter read at Masses across Ireland querying the impact of ME on children in schools: 'What will we be expected to teach children in school about marriage? Will those who sincerely continue to believe that marriage is between a man and a woman be forced to act against their conscience?' (Leahy cited in Hayes, 2015).

Such diverse appropriations of the figure of the child in the ME debates in Ireland beg close attention to how MET is produced in, and productive of, new relations of childhood and sexuality in Irish primary schools. We believe it is valuable to consider how debates about these issues become entangled, mediating imaginaries of childhood, sexuality, progress and the Irish nation-state.

This article is organized in the following way. First, we introduce how theorizing on queer temporalities might inform an analysis of the ways that MET mediates imaginaries of childhood, sexuality and the nation-state in and through sexuality/school relations in Ireland. We then briefly consider how Catholicism shapes formation of children in Irish primary schools before explicating the methodological details of this study. And, in the main body of this article, we put queer time to work in exploring the ways in which parents, teachers and principals, in the midst of the ME referendum in May/June 2015 in Ireland, were processing what ME might mean for gender and sexuality diversity and children in their primary schools. In attending to MET, we illustrate the ways in which narratives of progress and childhood innocence are entangled. We discuss how narratives of progress can

obscure and detract from persisting chrononormative, heteronormative logics of growing up. At the same, we acknowledge how moments created by ME point the way for newly shaped imaginaries of childhood and sexuality.

### **Queer temporality, progress and innocence**

Time is ‘an invisible and silent relation of power’ (Sharma, 2013: 315), an ‘always-already intersecting form of social difference’ (Sharma, 2013: 317). For example, biological, reproductive and family time are all ‘heteronormative time/space constructs’ (Halberstam, 2005: 10). Queer – understood as that which is unassimilable, destabilizing and troubling of the totalizing logics underpinning normativity – facilitates an interrogation of the normative logics of time. Halberstam asserts that queer temporality involves ‘a counterintuitive critique, one that works against the grain of the true, the good, and the right’ (Halberstam in Dinshaw et al., 2007: 194). In Halberstam’s (2005: 3) view, queer time facilitates alternative temporalities to emerge whereby futures can be imagined outside of normative social scripts prescribed by the ‘paradigmatic markers of life experience’ – birth, marriage, reproduction and death. Of course, thinking time queerly is no guarantor of realizing queer political projects (Jagose in Dinshaw et al., 2007: 191). But queer temporality allows considered attention to the productive effects of how people become ‘bound to one another, engrouped, made to feel coherently collective’ (Freeman, 2010: 3) through specific configurations of time such as MET.

For instance, in Ireland, headlines signalled that ‘It’s time for marriage equality in Ireland’ (Walsh, 2015) and declared that for Northern Ireland it was also ‘only a matter of time’ (Hayden, 2015). Imaginaries of Irish progressivism boomed, and Ireland was held up as a temporally advanced beacon of sexual progress, echoed in campaign videos such as ‘Hey Australia: It’s time for marriage equality’ (GetUp, 2015). Eamon Gilmore, Tánaiste (Deputy Prime Minister) at the time, announced that ME was ‘quite simply, the civil rights issue of this generation’ (*The Journal*, 2012). Such mainstream political consensus about the introduction of ME in Ireland and investments in imaginaries of Irish sexual progressivism (Neary, 2016) alert us to the ways that temporal schema mark out the boundaries of normativity and belonging. This article attends to these logics of MET and the particular forms they take when they meet with the figure of the child in primary schooling.

Schooling has played a crucial part in the naturalization and normalization of time. Cover et al. (2017) provide a useful explication of the various narratives of progress circulating in the relationship between schools, gender and sexuality. They problematize articulations of progress underpinned by developmental models whereby individual LGBT+ development is understood as happening through a series of chronological identity stages on a linear trajectory from vulnerability to pride. They are critical of versions of progress that (re)produce stereotypes and simplify complex and varied experiences into universalizing truths of LGBT+ subjecthood reiterated as only achievable in a post-school context.

Such observations prompt this inquiry into the discourses of sexual progress and truths of LGBT+ subjecthood that circulated and entangled with existing temporal logics of childhood innocence as Irish primary school communities processed the new rhythms of MET.

Queer theory has long attended to how discourses of innocence constrain and restrict childhood. For example, Bond Stockton (2009: 30) explains how, configured through the adult's retrospective 'gauzy lens of what they attribute to the child', childhood innocence is constructed as at once a-sexual and proto-heterosexual. Following Dyer (2017: 300), we assert that 'strengthening a conceptual relation between "queer" and "childhood" can help to cultivate a culture of critique concerning the interruptive force of heteronormativity on the child's development and, more broadly, expose asymmetries in how children are treated and the rhetoric of innocence is distributed'. Such a queer analysis of the 'rhetoric of innocence' offers a refusal to 'calculate the child's future before it has the opportunity to explore desire' (Dyer, 2017: 292). Indeed, many working in early childhood and elementary education contexts have begun to explore how the trope of the innocent child regulates and constrains what children may learn about sexuality (Davies and Robinson, 2010; DePalma and Atkinson, 2009; Robinson, 2013) and sustains a heteronormative timeline that idealizes the good future heteronormative sexual citizen-subject (Renold, 2000; Robinson, 2012).

In Ireland, primary education is an eight-year cycle (ages 4–12): junior infants, senior infants and first to sixth classes. Mirroring contexts such as Canada and Australia (Rasmussen, 2016), the primary mode of addressing the topic of gender and sexuality diversity in primary schools in Ireland has been to focus on homophobia and transphobia, reproducing LGBT+ subjectivities as always 'at risk' (Bryan and Mayock, 2012). While the notion of bullying prevention appeals to those in schooling contexts, the persistence of notions of childhood innocence ensures that education about sexuality and gender diversity continues to be seen by school staff and parents as a much more explosive topic than bullying prevention (Neary et al., 2016). In Ireland, teaching about gender and sexuality mostly occurs within Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) – a compulsory part of the curriculum at both primary and secondary level in Ireland. While some of the aims of the primary school programme bear scope for teaching about difference – for example, 'to enable the child to be comfortable with the sexuality of oneself and others while growing and developing' (Department of Education and Skills, 1996) – silences abound throughout the curriculum guidelines in relation to LGBT+ identities. Such aims are further hampered by teacher anxiety and discomfort in relation to preventing homophobia/transphobia and educating around gender and sexuality in Irish primary schools (Neary et al., 2016).

### **Catholic time and the formation of the child**

The temporal schemas around childhood innocence in Ireland are further complicated by the ways in which a kind of *Catholic time* is embedded in the very fabric

of primary schooling. Effectively, a publicly funded denominational primary education system exists and education policy, schools and a significant proportion of teacher education has been shaped by a Catholic religious ethos (Harford, 2010). Currently in Ireland, 97.4% of primary schools are denominational; they have a religious patronage and faith formation happens within the school day. Multi-denominational (MD) schools make up 2.3% of primary schools in Ireland. These are predominantly run by a non-profit company called 'Educate Together' where religious education takes the form of a multi-denominational ethics curriculum called 'Learn Together'. Reflecting historically intertwined church/state relations in education, there are no non-denominational schools in Ireland. Despite attempts at divestment since 2012, 91% of primary schools are currently under Catholic patronage.

Normative logics of Catholic time are embedded in the everyday practices of these schools. Religious education (in the form of Catholic faith formation) is taught at 12pm each day – a time originally established so that the priest could visit the school to observe the teaching of religious education. The Catholic school timeline is also plotted by several highly gendered and heteronormative religious celebratory life-moments. As part of the school day, children receive preparation for the sacraments of Confession and Communion in second class and Confirmation in fifth or sixth class. The past, present and future of primary schooling is articulated through a linear trajectory of these life-moments (Kitching, 2017), firmly establishing a *before Communion–after Communion–before Confirmation–after Confirmation* timeline. Parents have the right to remove their child from these aspects of the day, but often children of a minority religious faith or children who have no religious affiliations remain in the classroom for these instructions (Smyth and Darmody, 2011).

This predominantly Catholic architecture and its associated heteronormative timeline sit in constant tension with state-sponsored investments in Irish sexual progressivism (Bailey, 2017; Fahie, 2016; Neary, 2013, 2017; Neary et al., 2018). But we also acknowledge that reluctances to teach about gender and sexuality persist in education contexts where the influence of Catholicism is quite differently configured (Rasmussen, 2016). Furthermore, while invoking discourses of child protection and childhood innocence in Catholic schools might be interpreted as Catholic resistance to changes in the heteronormative timeline of growing up, these discourses should also be understood in light of historical and on-going revelations of child abuse associated with the Catholic church. Such happenings potentially heighten the caution and reticence of those working in Catholic schools about raising issues of childhood sexuality, adding further layers to the already complicated relationship between childhood innocence, sexuality and schooling.

Before taking forward queer temporalities' potential for grappling with the complex entanglements of sexual progress, childhood innocence and MET, we first provide a brief discussion of the methodology underpinning the empirical research upon which this article draws.

## Methodology

The qualitative study upon which this article draws sought to capture multiple perspectives on gender and sexuality diversity in primary schools. We are fortunate that this study was undertaken at a time when it wasn't at all clear to participants how the ME referendum might impact primary education, and it is precisely the negotiation of these uncertainties that is of interest to us in this article. The study was conducted by Neary in May and June 2015 – coincidentally, at the time of the ME Referendum in Ireland. Following a letter of invitation providing information about the study sent to 200 randomly selected schools in Ireland, six schools volunteered to take part: two 'denominational' (Den.) schools (schools under Catholic patronage), one 'interdenominational' school (schools under Christian patronage – Catholic and Church of Ireland) and three multid denominational (MD) schools (schools under the patronage of the 'Educate Together' organization). Throughout this article, the interdenominational school is categorized together with the two denominational schools under the abbreviation of 'Den.' (denominational) in order to protect the anonymity of participants. Five of the schools in this study were co-educational and one was a single-sex boys' school. In each school, the principal acted as a research gatekeeper, communicating with teachers and parents and sending out an open invitation to take part in the study. All of these school types are publicly funded.

A total of 46 people took part in this study. One-to-one semi-structured audio-recorded interviews were conducted with one principal and two teachers in each school. Out of the six principals, three were women and three were men. Out of the 12 teachers, nine were women and three were men. Interviews lasted an average of one hour, and questions focused on understandings of and approaches to homophobia and transphobia as well as teaching and learning about gender and sexuality. A focus group on the same topics was conducted with a total of 28 parents contacted by the principal in each school. Twenty-five were women and three were men, and the groups comprised between three and seven people. Rooted in a queer, post-structural epistemology, the accounts arising in this study and gathered together in this article are deemed to be bound up in 'the historical processes that, through discourse, position subjects and produce their experience' (Scott, 1992: 25). They are not 'brute data waiting to be coded, labelled with other brute words' (St Pierre and Jackson, 2014: 715) in order to represent a Cartesian 'reality'. Rather they are generative starting points for thinking about the function and effects of discourses of sexual progress and innocence in and through education contexts.

In the remainder of this article, informed by theorizing on queer temporality, we explore how school communities were processing MET and trace the entanglement of discourses of sexual progress and childhood innocence, providing new insight into how MET mediates imaginaries of childhood, sexuality and the nation-state.

## Marriage Equality Time (MET) in Ireland

The emergence of MET in Ireland shunted temporalities of sexuality to the foreground, forcing the participants in this study to wrestle with new visibilities of sexuality in primary schools. The following conversation provides a rich introduction to how, as MET emerged in Ireland, imaginaries of sexual progress and discourses of childhood innocence were thoroughly entangled:

P2: I wouldn't like children in the school, if they have two moms or two dads, to not be able to be themselves and be open about it.

P1: But I think that will all change now because of the Referendum. Like, it's open and it's –

P3: You can be who you are.

P4: But how do you explain to child . . . just say there was a kid in the school that has two dads, well where did the child come from, like, how do you explain? Like, the IVF and the surrogate mother and I just, I just find that hard to go into detail about it.

P3: That's more complicated actually, that's a lot more complicated.

P4: Yea, 'cos that's what they will ask.

P3: But they don't really need to know that 'til secondary school.

P2: No they need to ask, they ask.

P4: It's fifth and sixth, as soon as their hormones start kicking in and as soon as they, I would just find that hard to explain.

...

P3: You could say it's adoption.

P4: I know but they want to know . . . that would just be the issue that I'd have. How do you explain?

P2: Think about it objectively, to explain to your child where they came from is a weird concept for them anyway . . . so this is just another weird concept.

P1: Yea.

P3: Yea.

P4: I just wouldn't know how to explain it.

...

P2: Do they understand the concept of people donating blood or giving kidneys? . . . just explain it in the same way that somebody might give their kidney to somebody they really loved. That they would be happy to host their baby for nine months.

P3: [Laughing] Good luck with that.

P1: It will get easier in time with the Referendum . . . it will get easier in time because Ireland has voted yes so it's not a taboo any more, it's out there and it's great.

(Parents, School C, Den.)

This conversation is emblematic of how this article captures a very fluid moment in time – MET – whereby participants were processing, grappling and wrestling with what ME might mean for children in primary schools. Parent voices move back and forth between imaginaries of Ireland as a beacon of equality and concerns regarding appropriate timelines for children to learn about sexuality at school.



In the conversation above, one parent assumes that the ME referendum will somehow (dis)solve all of these issues with time. Another parent appears eager to think through possible ways of broaching these topics with children. For some parents, the notion of educating about LGBT+ identities is ‘complicated’ and ‘hard to explain’. This diversity of voices, and others who assert that ‘you’re not going to sit down with a six-year old and start saying “well, you know, you can have two mummies or you can have two daddies”’ because it might expose certain children as ‘different’ (Parent 2, School B, Den.), might be read as mechanisms of avoidance or active attempts to prevent the disturbance of heteronormative logics. Such perspectives point to the complexities of modern-day reproductive technologies and how they might complicate explanations given to children about where they came from, regardless of their parents’ sexual identity. But, on the contrary, another parent radically levels the playing field with the suggestion that *any* explanation about where children ‘came from’ is a ‘weird concept’, regardless of the child’s parentage. Such commentary is, at the same time, a powerful signal of the kinds of new imaginaries of childhood and sexuality that might be made possible through MET.

In the following two sections, we follow up and tease out the diversity of perspectives signposted by this rich conversation above as the participants in this study grappled with the newness of MET. First, we turn to explore the participants’ investments in Irish imaginaries of ME as sexual progress. Then we explore the entanglement of these imaginaries with well-rehearsed arguments about childhood innocence as participants processed what ME might mean for schools.

### **MET and Irish imaginaries of sexual progress**

Echoing across the vast majority of participants in this study was the idea that enacting ME was a symbol of sexual progressiveness that marked a ‘New Ireland’ (Parent 4, School B, Den.). The following quote is reflective of dominant discussions around ME in this study:

So I said it to my mam . . . and my dad. My dad would be the cranky old man . . . And I said ‘so are you going out voting there Da?’.

‘Oh I am, yea, yea, yea, yea’.

‘So how would you be voting?’.

‘I’m going out there now and I’ll be fucking voting yes . . . and the fucking eejits out there, and them going voting no?’. And he went on a little rant.

And I went ‘oh, right’ and this is grand. Anyway and I says to Mam . . . ‘what about you?’.

And she was ‘God, yea, I’m going out voting yes, we’re all going out and voting yes’.

All the Bridge club – they were all going out and voting yes.

(Principal, School E, Den.)

The vehement, common-sense tone of this account alludes to and presumes consensus about ME as a progressive step on Ireland’s timeline of sexual progress.

It echoes mainstream political support for ME and embraces Ireland's new identity as an international beacon of sexual progressivism. Those voting 'no' are 'eejits' (idiots), which, if taken literally, signifies an ignorant or out-dated mode of existence.

In many participants' accounts, Ireland's introduction of ME is deemed to be a beacon of equality for the rest of the world to follow: 'But sure Ireland has opened up now the gates for the rest of the world' (Parent 4, School C, Den.). Here, ideas about progress that we see being attached to individual subjects – moving from a place of shame and ignorance to a place of pride and commonsense – are transposed to the nation-state. Such workings of MET position Ireland as an advanced nation-state leading the world in equality. A 'sense of being and belonging that feels natural' (Freeman, 2010: 18) is engendered through this commitment to a particular kind of progressive timeline with ME as a significant turning point both for individuals and the nation, safeguarding a path to sexual progress that no longer separates citizens, but acts as a unifying force.

In many ways, participants in this study portrayed progress in relation to gender and sexuality diversity at school to be inevitable over time. Time – conceptualized as a forward-moving, evolutionary trajectory – would bring sexual progressivism. For example, one parent said 'I just think time will change it all...' (Parent 1, School C, Den.) and a principal echoed this, saying 'I think it'll be an evolutionary process and people will accept it [being LGBT+] and we'll all move on' (Principal, School C, Den.). Such perspectives signify a passive, teleological understanding of progress related to gender and sexuality where the topic will eventually be declared over as a result of the passage of time. They also contribute to a vision of time as 'seamless, unified and forward-moving' (Freeman, 2010: xxii), with ME as a natural step on this timeline of inevitable sexual progress:

... this last weekend [ME referendum] is so momentous. And I think children need to be aware of that. And I would always try and explain to my kids what it was like when I was in school ... so they recognize that they're coming from a much better place. (Parent 2, School B, Den.)

Emphasized here is the time-oriented, generational aspect of progress – how this generation is disconnected from the ills of the past, how ME proves that things are so much better now. ME is conceptualized as both a cause of progressive change in Ireland but also as a resulting effect of an Ireland that was 'ready' for change. At any rate, both narratives project a linear timeline of LGBT+ subjecthood (Cover et al., 2017), with ME as a step towards a brighter future, and remind that MET is actively mediating and conditioning particular imaginaries of sexual futures and reinforcing homonormative trajectories of sexual subjectivity.

Across the participants in this study, there was also the sense that ME would slowly and innocuously instigate change in relation to gender and sexuality diversity, 'dripping its way in' (Parent 2, School B, Den.) to primary schools. One teacher recalled a conversation with a group of six- to seven-year old children

in her classroom as an example of how ME was slowly changing mindsets at school:

She was telling me that her aunt is getting married and she said 'but to a girl, like to another girl'.

And so another boy said 'a girl? Is she mad?'

And the little girl said 'no, a girl can get married to a girl'.

And then another boy said 'yea, they can and boys can marry boys' and the little fellow said 'oh right'.

And he was playing and then he just went back to it and it was just totally accepted.  
(Teacher 2, School E, Den.)

Clearly, the girl in this account whose aunt is getting married to a woman is getting very different messages about sexuality and relationships to the boy who believes the aunt is 'mad'. The introduction of ME produced this moment where the boy was forced to process this new information and the conversation, as recalled by the teacher, suggests that this new information was 'just totally accepted' by him. There are two points of interest raised by this excerpt above. Firstly, same-sex intimacy is conflated with marriage here. In this move, the normativity of marriage smooths over and de-sexualizes the same-sex relationship and we wonder whether this is what has been 'totally accepted' by the boy. Such accounts are illustrative of how MET generates opportunities for new dialogue with destabilizing potential at school, but such interactions can also gloss over the subject and leave heteronormativity largely intact.

Secondly, this and other teachers' accounts in this study that cast children as 'open to anything' (Teacher 2, School E, Den.) make assumptions of progress via the a priori progressive child. These common-sense discourses of sexual progress associated with ME also assimilate dissenting voices, and this was powerfully evident in the account of one parent:

You don't really want to give your opinion . . . the vote yes, I thought came across very strong and very pushy, to be honest . . . That anybody that was gonna vote no was gonna just stand back and say nothing or it was like you were gonna be attacked.  
(Parent 4, School C, Den.)

This reticence to outwardly disagreeing with ME alerts us to how public pedagogies of ME as sexual progress worked to assimilate, such that certain voices were alienated and silenced. They also remind that 37.9% of people voted 'no' in the ME referendum, quickly dismantling fantasies of the 'yes' consensus.

The vast majority of participants in this study were deeply invested in imaginaries of Irish progressivism and the common-sense narratives of ME as sexual progress that were espoused in mainstream political support and public debates. But also evident in these participants' accounts is how such discourses demand consensus and assimilation, smothering dissonance and sweeping up the

complexity of LGBT+ lives into linear sexual futures (Cover et al., 2017), often with heteronormative and reductive effects. Furthermore, the glimpses of dissenting voices interrupt the notion that sexual progress is somehow inevitable with the passing of time. At the same time, we understand the identification of such fissures in these temporal schemas of sexual progress as points of resistance; queer temporalities that discombobulate ‘normative temporal conditionings’ (Freeman, 2010: 169), with the potential to yield ‘other possibilities for living in relation to indeterminately past, present and future others’ (Freeman, 2010: xxii). Exploring MET in this emergent state offers such generative possibilities. We now turn to focus our attention on how, as MET emerged, imaginaries of Irish sexual progressivism entangled with the temporal schemas of childhood innocence in primary schools.

### **MET: ‘Progress’ meets ‘childhood innocence’**

ME debates clearly provoked participants’ engagements with and investments in Irish imaginaries of sexual progressivism but most seemed less sure about what the affirmation of LGBT+ rights through ME might mean for gender and sexuality in primary schooling. For example, one principal said: ‘I know it was a yes vote and I think that will be huge . . . [but] it’s same-sex marriage, it’s not the same as accepting people that are gay’ (Teacher 1, School B, Den.). Similarly, in contradiction to earlier characterizations of Ireland as sexually progressive, one parent said: ‘We’re a long way from that [reading stories with LGBT characters in primary school classrooms] in Ireland, I think. I do think we’re a long way, that’s a long way ahead of us, a long way ahead of us. Which is sad to say’ (Parent 1, School B, Den.). Such perspectives warn of the limitations of ME in disrupting heteronormative trajectories of childhood and prompt close attention to the specific ways that imaginaries of sexual progress mingle with discourses of innocence in primary schools.

Across the study, reflex responses of participants to the concepts of ‘childhood innocence’ and ‘excess’ complicated and constrained visions of the impact that ME might have on primary schools. Many suggested that childhood innocence commanded and fuelled a great level of caution and watchfulness: ‘there’s . . . a great respect for the innocence of children so you’re careful’ (Principal, School C, Den.). Mirroring other contexts (Robinson, 2012, 2013), the regulation of ‘difficult knowledges’ was also ever-present: ‘you don’t want to be, their young little brains, putting too much information’ (Parent 1, School A, MD). Such reactions were likely influenced by how sexuality education is primarily understood in heterophysiological/reproductive terms in Ireland and as beginning in the latter end of a child’s time in primary school – fifth and sixth class (aged 11–12). Furthermore, as one principal pointed out, the idea that sexuality identity or sexual orientation is very often understood as ‘something that is completely sexualised’ and so ‘not child friendly’ (Principal, School A, MD) most likely features in such discussions.

As dialogue ensued in interviews and focus groups, perspectives in relation to the concept of childhood innocence became more nuanced. For instance, one

teacher emphasized how children could be educated about LGBT + identities in an age-appropriate manner: ‘two men love each other, two women love each other, I do think that’s acceptable for their age range’ (Teacher 2, School B, Den.). Many parents also suggested that teachers could educate about LGBT + identities within the latter end of primary school: ‘I think it should be part of the curriculum from fourth class up’ (Parent 4, School C, Den.).

And so, as is evident from these quotes, initial reflex protection-of-childhood-innocence responses were re-articulated as an age-appropriate timeline that sought to add ‘it’ [the LGBT+ ‘other’] into sex education at what were deemed to be appropriate points in the child’s learning trajectory. At one level, the introduction of ME appears here to be opening up new possibilities for LGBT + identities to be present in sexuality education in primary schools. However, as Dyer (2017) asserts, a truly queer approach to childhood studies would not only be concerned with the erasure or presence of LGBT+ identities in the curriculum. It would also involve a queering of childhood innocence itself; an interrogation and disruption of ‘teleologically constructed narratives of growth that require a developmental sequence which culminates in normalcy’ (Dyer, 2017: 292). Instead, the age-appropriate timelines articulated by some parents and teachers in this study point to the continuing underlying problematic assumption that children are somehow free of sexual knowledge until introduced to sexual knowledge by adults. Such assumptions are similarly reflected in Foley’s (2017) exploration of ‘Irish secular liberal’ responses to three relatively recent moments in the public sphere related to teenage sexuality and sexual consent laws in Ireland. Foley (2017) demonstrates how even as Irish secular liberal discourses legitimize teenage sexual subjecthood in certain instances such as sex education, teenage sexuality continues to be regulated and silenced through public discourse around sexual consent. Foley (2017) reveals how this happens through the nefarious workings of power at work in taken-for-granted and common-sense views about progress. It is not our intention to stray into discussing issues of consent in this article. But what we are concerned with here is how the logics of sexual progress present in MET continue to orientate away from the nuances of childhood sexuality. But such orientations are inevitably predicated on the presumption of the child as heterosexual. They leave intact a heteronormative timeline of sexual development wherein there is an ‘appropriate’ moment, later in childhood, for the presumed heterosexual child to be introduced to alternatives to heterosexuality. Furthermore, they plot a homonormative timeline of delay for the queer child.

The potential for the discussion of LGBT + identities to stray into physiological territory was an ever-present threat to childhood innocence. Some worried about the timing of education about LGBT + identities happening in the same years as education about heterosexual reproduction (fifth and sixth class):

But ... you don’t go into any of the mechanics of those kind of relationships at 10; why do you have to go into the mechanics of it if it’s a same-sex relationship or a transgender relationship or something? It’s not, you know, there’s no need to, just

because it's a gay relationship, like, they don't have to know the bloomin' physiology of it. (Parent 2, School B, Den.)

The image of the malleable and impressionable child who might be persuaded to be gay hung in the backdrop to such accounts. The 'open to anything' child conjured in collective imaginaries of sexual progress is the same child whose childhood innocence must be protected. This was explicitly conjured by one parent:

Well I can tell you when I told my mother that I was coming here to do this today . . . 'oh for God's sake' she says, 'talk about it in school, and put the ideas into their head . . . and then they'll definitely be gay' [laughing]. (Parent 4, School B, Den.)

Its utterance in such an explicit manner and the laughing that ensued amongst the parents seemed at once a release of continuously latent fears about making non-heteronormative trajectories visible and a soft mocking of those fears expressed by older parents. The parents here appeared to be concerned about what the ME debates might expose their children to, but they also sought to distance themselves from attitudes that depict gayness as something contagious. Such accounts are illustrative of the simultaneous rigidity and elasticity of the temporal schemas at work through MET.

We see how the dialogue generated within focus groups sent fractures through the veneer of childhood innocence, surfacing ambivalence, as well as a desire to be seen as sexually progressive in relation to ME and discussions with children about sexuality and family formation. At the same time, participants in this study were focused on appropriate timeframes and suitable speeds through which to educate children about LGBT+ identities. Here we can see how 'age-appropriate' timelines act as technologies of governance wrapping up, tidying up and re-directing anxieties around children and sexuality (especially non-normative genders and sexualities), while simultaneously working to preserve the veneer of 'progressive' orientations. Such temporal schemas most often recede to the backdrop of everyday life of primary schooling, but MET makes visible the ways in which they are predicated upon and invested in a linear heterosexual future. While well-rehearsed arguments about childhood innocence continued to permeate participants' thinking regarding gender, sexuality and primary schooling in Ireland, this was not without some modification in relation to ME. Our hope in foregrounding these tensions related to conflicting affects associated with MET is that discussions about children, education and sexuality might be imagined otherwise.

For instance, Bond Stockton (2009: 12) calls attention to the 'brutality of the ideal of the innocent child', interrogating the 'vertical, forward-motion metaphor of growing up', explaining that 'one does not "grow up" from innocence to the adult position of protecting it'. Instead, she posits the metaphor 'growing sideways', suggesting that 'the width of a person's experience or ideas, their motives or their motions, may pertain at any age' (Bond Stockton, 2009: 11). Similarly, informed by Deleuze and Guattari's work on children, Hickey-Moody (2013: 282) argues that

childhood 'is not a state that can be plotted on a teleological trajectory'. Deterritorializing the psychological singular subject of the child and removing childhood from the constraints of a particular age bracket, Hickey Moody (2013: 283) outlines how the becoming-child is a multiple subject whose becoming occurs in blocks, collective subjectivities zigzagging across time. Such perspectives point to how close attention to the multiple temporalities of childhood states can be employed to 'deterritorialize childhood itself, the partial mixture which holds up individual figures of youth' (Hickey-Moody, 2013: 284), thereby opening up the potential for the timeline of 'growing up' and its heteronormative/homonormative logics to be imagined otherwise.

## Conclusion

The data drawn upon in this article do not tell us whether participants' views regarding sexual progressivism reflect what they thought prior to the referendum or if the public pedagogy of ME was really shifting people's perceptions of LGBT+ rights, children, schooling and sexuality. Nevertheless, summoning the de-stabilizing and generative potential of theorizing on queer time, this article's examination of this emergent MET in the specificity of sexuality/schooling relations in Ireland contributes new insights into the ways in which MET mediates imaginaries of childhood, sexuality and the nation-state.

In attending closely to the workings of MET in primary schools in Ireland, we have exemplified how national imaginaries of sexual progress become tangled up in discourses of childhood innocence related to gender and sexuality. Across this study there was an aura of consensus that ME was a significant step on the timeline of sexuality progress. However, these state-sponsored imaginaries of progress – when positioned alongside the passive presumptive notion of progress as inevitable – alert to how such temporal 'hidden rhythms' mark out particular boundaries of belonging and normativity (Freeman, 2010: 3). The heteronormative/homonormative chronological logics of time work through the presumptive, taken-for-granted nature of these discourses in such a way that the promise of progressive change is interspersed with delay and holding back. As we have demonstrated, presumptive discourses of 'childhood innocence' and 'age-appropriateness' become entangled with ME debates and continue to be used to legitimize the enactment of timelines and speeds through which children should learn about gender and sexuality diversity. In this way, we can see how the assumed progressiveness of MET maybe provides cover for the continuation of normalizing scripts under the banner of a kind of progressive age-appropriateness, often leaving the taken-for-granted temporal logics of childhood innocence and thus the path towards the heteronormative citizen subject intact.

At the same time, we are not denying the transgressive potentiality brought about by events such as ME in contexts such as Ireland and Australia with their capacity for knock-on effects in schools. For instance, this quote from a parent in this study goes beyond an age-appropriate approach to taking the Marriage

Equality moment as an opportunity to completely reimagine sex education in primary schools: ‘this is a huge opportunity to change . . . most sex education is about the mechanics really . . . I think it would be amazing to just turn the whole thing on its head’ (Parent 3, School F, MD). Notwithstanding how such efforts are always bound up in the constraints of heteronormativity (and indeed the data in this article clearly illustrate this entanglement), such ‘reimaginings’ are hopeful political provocations that are potentially generative.

Finally, this article has underlined how time is ‘itself material for critical and cultural practices that counter the insistent rhythm of (re)production’ (Freeman, 2012: 169). Attending to the ‘uneven temporalities’ (Sharma, 2013: 315) of MET foregrounds the ways in which imaginaries of childhood, sexuality and the nation-state are mediated. It points to the necessity for meaningful engagement with the present moment of childhood in all its messiness and complexity and the potential in opening up to the ‘expansive now’ of time (Dinshaw et al., 2007: 185) and enacting a ‘slow time’ with an emphasis on how modernity *feels* (Freeman, 2012) – in particular for those to whom these logics do not appear natural. Such moves promise alternative conditions of possibility for children ‘that are not fuelled by fear’ (Bond Stockton, 2009: 12), and the potential for sexuality/schooling relations to be imagined otherwise.

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