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## Title

'Other spaces' for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and questioning (LGBTQ) students:

positioning LGBTQ-affirming schools as sites of resistance within inclusive education

## Abstract

This paper explores the growing interest in schools which are aimed at children and young people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and questioning (LGBTQ), schools described here as *LGBTQ-affirming*. Schools which target specific groups of students are sometimes viewed as being anti-inclusive as they assign labels to students and separate them from one another. This is based on a notion of inclusive education as a single 'school for all'; a comprehensive, common school which is suitable for all children in a particular locality.

Through using academic literature alongside original data from an in-depth qualitative case study of an LGBTQ-affirming school in Atlanta, this paper addresses the question of whether there is a place for LGBTQ-affirming schools within inclusive education systems. It argues that the word 'segregated' is not an accurate description of these schools, positing that *segregated* spaces are not the same as *separate* spaces. It argues that the separateness of LGBTQ-affirming schools is important to their role in inclusive education, specifically when they are positioned as examples of Foucault's heterotopias. Viewing them through this theoretical lens enables them to be seen as 'other spaces', as a form of 'resistance' and 'protest' which may 'unstitch' the utopian vision of inclusive education.

## Keywords

LGBTQ; LGBTQ-affirming; segregation; 'other spaces'; heterotopias; inclusive education

## Introduction

Globally, there is an increasing awareness of the challenge of addressing social disadvantage within education systems and one of the most pressing concerns is how to reduce inequalities (OECD 2013).

Governments within many neoliberal countries have introduced elements of competition and choice into education systems, all in the name of driving up standards and improving social equality

(Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe 1995; Ball 2008; Saifer and Gaztambide-Fernández 2017). One of the

consequences of these policies is that education systems have become fractured so that a range of

school types co-exist. This has moved beyond the private/public divide that has been evident for many years; publicly funded schools now exist in many shapes and sizes, some of which have been developed to meet the needs of specific cohorts of students, such as those from particular faiths, genders, ethnic and ability groups. Many students no longer attend their geographically closest school, but one that has been selected for another reason.

Alongside the increasingly fragmentation within school systems, the discourse of 'inclusive education' has remained prevalent across many countries, and not just those in the wealthier 'Global North' (Sebba and Ainscow 1996). This approach, a highly contested concept, is conceptualised by many as the promotion of a single 'school for all'; a comprehensive, common school which is suitable for all children in a particular locality (Ainscow and César 2006; Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006; Fielding and Moss 2011; UNESCO 1994). Schools which target specific groups of students - such as those with special educational needs or with particular religious, ethnic or social characteristics - are sometimes viewed as being anti-inclusive as they assign labels to students and separate them from one another (Baker et al. 2004; Barton 2003; Gulson and Webb 2016). This is based on an underlying principle, articulated in the highly influential Salamanca Statement, that '[S]chools should accommodate *all* children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions' (UNESCO 1994, p.6, emphasis added).

This paper explores the growing interest in schools which are aimed at children and young people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and questioning (LGBTQ+), schools which, though not exclusive to these groups, have been explicit in their ambitions to offer schooling which is inclusive for this cohort. These schools are described here as LGBTQ-affirming<sup>1</sup>. Through analysing media discourses and academic literature alongside data from an in-depth qualitative case study of one LGBTQ-affirming school in Atlanta, this paper addresses the question of whether there could be a place for LGBTQ-affirming schools as part of inclusive education systems. Our analysis positions them as 'other spaces'; as examples of Foucault's (1986) heterotopias. By viewing them through this

theoretical lens, the paper challenges the use of the word 'segregation' in relation to these schools (frequently cited as a criticism in the news media), positing that *segregated* spaces are not the same as *separate* spaces, and that in the case of LGBTQ-affirming schools, this distinction is important. Rather than perceiving this separation as anti-inclusive, we argue the opposite: that 'voluntary separation' can be justified in terms of actually enhancing 'the conditions necessary for equality and citizenship' (Merry 2013, p.4). Through positioning them as 'other spaces', as heterotopias, we further argue that they can be seen as a form of 'resistance' and 'protest' (Earl 2014; Clennon 2014) which provide a liberation-based curriculum which is quite different from dominant discourses offered within conventional forms of schooling. As such, they might 'undermine' or unstitch' (Johnson 2006) the utopian vision of inclusive education.

## **Research Methodology**

Data and arguments presented in this paper derive from a research project entitled: "Radical Inclusivity/Exclusivity: Reconsidering 'exclusive' schools and their role within 'inclusive' education". This study ran between February 2016 and July 2017 and focused on Pride School Atlanta, a democratic, LGBTQ-affirming 'free school' which officially opened in August 2016 for ages 5 to 18. This paper focuses on data collected during the first phase of fieldwork in September 2016 at which point the school had 8 students and approximately 6 teaching staff. This first cohort of students were white, aged between 8-17, geographically-dispersed (in some cases travelling an hour by car to school), and from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Students largely self-identified as trans, genderqueer or non-binary and predominately white staff tended to self-identify as LGBTQ. Empirical research in this first phase of fieldwork was undertaken over a two-week period and consisted of several visits and immersion in school life. Alongside this, theoretical consideration was also given to the ways in which this school relates to a larger group of 'separate' or 'alternative' schools, including those that also explicitly foreground 'LGBTQ+-inclusivity', such as Harvey Milk High School in New York, Alliance School in Milwaukee, and speculative proposals for similar schools in

Chicago (US), Toronto (Canada), and Manchester (UK) (i.e. Colapinto 2005; Younge 2012; Dean 2015; Warmington 2012). News media has frequently described these as 'gay schools', yet this is a rather simplistic framing (Hall and Hope 2018).

The study was deliberately designed to expose inconsistencies in the theoretical literature surrounding 'inclusive education' and to present a series of challenging questions to those describing themselves as 'inclusive educators'. It did not originate from a formulated political position that LGBTQ-affirming schools were, or were not, models of inclusive education. Rather, we had an open agenda and aimed to use these schools as a prism through which to examine the dominant discourses presented in the inclusive education literature and, by inference, the policies and practices that emanate from these. Given that the theoretical framework for inclusive education is complex and contradictory, it was necessary to draw upon a much broader academic field. First, literature concerning segregation, particularly that deriving from the civil rights movement in the US, formed a central focus of investigation; the pertinent elements are examined next in this paper in order to differentiate between the concepts of 'separation' and 'segregation'. Second, the notion of 'heterotopias' as counter-sites is utilised as a pivotal concept throughout this paper, with the argument presented that LGBTQ-affirming schools are prime examples of heterotopias, particularly those that are seen as sites of protest and resistance. This theoretical framework is simultaneously informed by, and informs, our interpretations of data.

The data presented in this paper are intended to enhance our theoretical arguments. Qualitative data drawn on here are from twenty formal interviews with 83 participants. Methods included focus groups with students and in-depth interviews with staff, parents and key stakeholders in Atlanta (e.g. a community activist working with conventional schools and a youth worker from a LGBTQ+ youth group). Focus groups took place in separate classrooms in school where students could not be overhead (Valentine 1999) and on average they lasted one hour. One researcher facilitated discussion of semi-structured questions and topics pertaining to previous schooling experiences,

knowledge and understanding of LGBTQ+-affirming schools, and everyday life at Pride School while the other researcher made extensive notes and probed for clarify and further detail (Hennessy and Heary 2005). All focus groups and interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in full. The names of all young people, staff, parents, and stakeholders have not been used and no identifying information will be given about any of these participants; quotations from individuals will be attributed with descriptions such as 'parent', 'student', 'youth worker' or 'teacher'. Explicit permission has been given to identify the school and its founder, Christian Zsilavetz, by the use of real names.

After repeated inductive thematic coding in NVivo by both researchers, key themes began to emerge (Bryman 2008). Accusations of segregation and preoccupations with 'safety' or 'a safe place' were two prominent themes and both are given specific focus in this paper. These themes were analysed in conjunction with theoretical literatures on inclusive education, segregation and heterotopias, thus providing a complex lens through which the arguments, attitudes and experiences of participants could be explored. It should be noted that only data that are directly relevant to the focus of this paper are presented here. A more detailed case study of Pride School Atlanta and the experiences of students, staff and parents as well as community and LGBTQ+ youth perspectives on this and other LGBTQ-affirming schools has been published elsewhere (Hope and Hall 2018).

### **Segregation or separation?**

Pride School is located within 10 miles of the birthplace of Martin Luther King (1929-1968) and the newly founded *Center for Civil and Human Rights*, both of which have symbolic importance in relation to the struggle for civil rights in the US. Luther King and his allies fought against segregation in education, arguing that segregation:

... not only harms one physically, but it injures one spiritually. It scars the soul and distorts the personality. It inflicts the segregator with a false sense of superiority, while inflicting the segregated with a false sense of inferiority (Luther King 1957).

This battle was, of course, in relation to black people in the US, and it would be inappropriate to crudely transpose arguments from this context onto other marginalised groups. The experiences of black people in the US throughout history, and the embodied experience of being black or from an ethnic minority, are qualitatively different from those who are marginalised on the grounds of gender, sexuality or disability. Nonetheless, the discourse of segregation – or more specifically, the abhorrence of segregation - has been used by inclusive educators, largely in relation to disability, who have argued that ‘... the concept of segregation is completely unjustifiable. It is morally offensive. It contradicts any notion of civil liberties and human rights – whoever it is done to, wherever it appears’ (Murray and Penman 1996, p.vii). Liasidou (2012, p.13) concurs, stating that ‘segregating practices are nothing but a violation of human rights’.

The notion of heterotopias (Foucault, 1986) draws attention to ‘other spaces’ which are separate from the dominant norm. They have been described as ‘counter-sites’. Using this lens provides a different perspective on ‘separateness’ and presents a challenge to the assumption that providing different spaces in education is necessarily anti-inclusive. Positioning LGBTQ-affirming schools as ‘heterotopias’ is the pivotal argument of this paper, with empirical evidence presented which indicates that they are sites of ‘resistance’ and ‘protest’.

In order to make the case that LGBTQ-affirming schools might be seen as heterotopias, it is first necessary to challenge the assumption that ‘separateness’ is necessarily problematic, or that separateness is the equivalent of segregation. Although, as has already been stated, it would be inappropriate to overstate the parallels between black people’s experiences of marginalisation with those of LGBTQ people, the legal system in the US has, in effect, recognised some similarities. This was because, in 2003, Harvey Milk High School was specifically challenged under *Brown v. Board of*

*Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954), the landmark legislation which ended legalised racial segregation in the US, making clear that the notion of 'separate but equal' was an untenable argument that could no longer be used to justify segregation. Harvey Milk High School was criticised for contravening the spirit, if not the letter, of *Brown* (Ford 2004, p.1306). Their defence was that they were not providing segregated provision because although they explicitly targeted LGBTQ+ students, they did not exclude non-LGBTQ students from the school (Colapinto 2005; Herszenhorn 2003). The lawsuit was settled in 2006 with an agreement that Harvey Milk High School would be clearer that it was open to anyone and was not an exclusively 'gay school' (Edozien 2006).

Pride School has been described as 'the South's first school for LGBTQ students' (Pratt 2016). Given the political significance of its location in Atlanta, it is perhaps reasonable to argue that accusations of 'segregation' might hold a particular weight in this city. Indeed, concerns about segregation and/or separation were raised by many of the participants in this research study, including participants from within the school itself and from other stakeholders in Atlanta. By way of illustration, these included a teacher at Pride School who initially had reservations about the school, stating 'Do we really want to isolate gay kids? Wouldn't it be better to integrate them more?'. A parent argued that 'it is segregation, but we're having to do it to keep our kids safe from society'. A student explained that 'people are comparing it to segregation'. A local youth worker stated that 'I thought it was segregation, I thought we want to be included in a traditional sense, not separate ourselves'. These align with - and are perhaps influenced by - critiques raised about LGBTQ-affirming schools in the media, one of the most provocative of which stated that 'The Harvey Milk School Has No Right to Exist' (Colapinto 2005). To interrogate these critiques, it is essential to deconstruct the definition of 'segregation' so as to explore whether it is a reasonable description of LGBTQ-affirming schools. This paper argues that it is not.

The history of the civil rights movement is an important starting place in terms of understanding the perception of segregation in the US. Since *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954)

overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896), numerous attempts to offer segregated education have faced legal challenge. This paper argues that segregated spaces are not the same as separate spaces, and that in the case of LGBTQ-affirming schools, this distinction is important. Segregation is enforced and is designed to exclude specific individuals, or more accurately, categories of individuals, such as those from particular ethnic groups. In the case of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), thirteen African American parents brought a case to the Supreme Court because they had applied for places for their children in the elementary schools closest to their homes but had been refused and forced to enrol at the segregated black schools. They were deliberately excluded on the grounds of 'race'<sup>2</sup>, and given that they demonstrated that segregated black schools were inferior, they were able to show that segregation upheld systematic inequality (Ford 2004). LGBTQ-affirming schools do not exclude anyone on the grounds of gender or sexual identity. In addition, and crucially, no student is compelled to enrol on the grounds of these either. As one student commented, 'It's not segregation. We're not being forced to attend'. This means that LGBTQ-affirming schools are just one of a range of options for students and parents to consider. They are heterotopias, 'other spaces' or 'counter-sites'; they are not inferior provision.

Even though LGBTQ-affirming schools are open to everyone, regardless of gender or sexual identity, it is reasonable to describe them as 'separate' provision on the grounds that they are set apart from conventional schools. Pride School is described by its founder as 'alternative.' It has deliberately been created as a school in its own right. This coheres with Kraftl's definition of 'alternative educational approaches' in that 'they are not administered, controlled and/or predominantly funded through the state-sanctioned educational programmes assumed to be the 'mainstream' ...' (Kraftl 2013, p.2). Put another way, even though Pride School is not exclusive to LGBTQ+ students, it operates quite differently from the vision of the 'inclusive school' which is described in the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), often heralded as 'the most significant international document' in terms of inclusive education (Ainscow and César 2006, p.231). Pride School is not a

local, common 'school for all' that is attended by every child within the locality. It is an alternative school of choice.

The question of how and when it might be appropriate for some communities to be separate from others has been addressed by Merry (2012, 2013). He uses the phrase 'voluntary separation' to draw a distinction between separation and segregation. The central tenet of his argument is that voluntary separation for stigmatized communities 'describes efforts to resist, reclaim, and rearrange the terms of one's segregation when those terms are counterproductive to equality and citizenship ... its justification hangs on its ability to *enhance the conditions necessary for equality and citizenship*' (Merry 2013, p.4, emphasis added). If his thesis is accepted, it serves as a direct challenge to inclusive educators in that it necessitates a substantial re-thinking of concepts of inclusion and exclusion. Rather than assuming that the aims of inclusive education are automatically best served by locating all children in the same schools (UNESCO 1994; Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006), it provides a clear rationale for why some the experiences of some communities might be enhanced by being in separate spaces. This resonates with data from Pride School where one student explained that 'we understand each other better, because we've all been through at least a little bit of the same things, and a lot of us have shared experiences' and the founder argued that 'kids from queer families have their own community'. It is reinforced by a community activist who argued that 'I'm absolutely okay with, like, black only spaces, or trans only spaces, or, you know, spaces that are intentionally exclusive of the oppressor, and I, you know, think there's a lot of benefits to be gained from that'. These spaces – heterotopias or 'other spaces' – are set aside from those dominated by powerful groups and thus might thus be seen as a form of resistance. This resonates with arguments, explored in depth later, that LGBTQ-affirming schools are sites of protest that potentially unstitch the utopian vision of inclusive education.

The question of voluntary separation is not just one which relates to LGBTQ-affirming schools. In 2009, a new school opened in Toronto, Canada (Gulson and Webb 2016). This highly controversial

school, the Africentric Alternative School, was specifically aimed at children of African descent and supporters claimed 'that the school provided a place for necessary 'self-separation' and intervention to redress the historical failure of the public school system to educate Black students in Toronto' (Gulson and Webb 2016, p.154). This underpinning philosophy here fits with notions of 'culturally responsive pedagogy' (Ladson-Billings 1995a, 1995b; Tate 1995), whereby schools recognise that traditional or mainstream approaches to pedagogy are frequently based on cultural assumptions and institutionalised biases. This school was set up in response to concerns that public schools in Toronto were not addressing the needs of this cohort of students, including issues of pedagogy and of personal safety. In the same city, proposals to open a public 'gay-centric' high school were turned down (Anon 2012; Warmington 2012), though an alternative provision LGBTQ+ classroom continues to exist (Triangle Program 2017).

The case for offering culturally responsive pedagogy will be discussed later in this paper, but the question of safety is an important one to address in terms of justifying voluntary separation. It formed a key theme through analysis of data in this study. Safety was an argument used by the Hetrick-Martin Institute, the organisation which set up Harvey Milk High School. Their website stated:

In an ideal world, all students who are considered *at-risk* would be *safely* integrated into all NYC public schools. But in the real world, *at-risk students* need a place like the Harvey Milk High School. HMHS is one of the many NYC small schools that provide *safety*, community, and high achievement for students not able to benefit from more traditional school environments (Hetrick-Martin Institute 2015, emphasis added).

Almost all of the students, all of the parents and most of the educators at Pride School referred to the provision of a 'safe space' as a fundamental justification for its existence. In describing the contrast with their previous schooling, one student explained that 'I mean, I'm not waking up every day scared that I'm going to get here and I'm going to get beat up, or I'm going to get, you know, a

knife pulled on me in the bathroom’. A parent described how her child, in the process of deciding to transition from male to female, had to ‘fearfully go through the locker room every day to get into gym’. A teacher defended the separateness of the school, arguing that ‘I think it’s good to get them out of the environment where they’re bullied and beat up. How can anybody object to that?’.

The notion of a ‘safe space’ has been a preoccupation for marginalised groups for several decades. Since the onset of the civil rights movement in the US and across the globe, groups that have traditionally experienced discrimination and oppression, such as black and ethnic minorities, indigenous populations, women, LGBTQ+ people and disabled people, have argued that being with others with the same identity has the potential to be liberating. This is, in part, because of the consciousness-raising function of some collective activities. They argue that the awareness of the ‘politics of identity’ are heightened by being with other people who have had, to a greater or lesser extent, similar experiences within socially and politically unequal societies. Being together – and away from others – provides a ‘safe space’ in which people can experience a sense of acceptance and solidarity (The Roestone Collective 2014; Frye 1997; Boostrom 1998; Stengel 2010).

The phrases ‘safe space’ and ‘safety’ have been used in numerous publications with reference to LGBTQ-affirming schools and in connection with LGBTQ+ spaces more generally (Bethard 2004; Ford 2004; Kirkley 1998; Mayes 2006; Sadowski 2016; Rasmussen 2004; Novacic 2016b). LGBTQ-affirming schools have frequently aligned themselves with this discourse of vulnerability and risk. A promotional video at Pride School, for example, cites a young person describing the school as ‘a safe haven’ and a parent as saying ‘these kids’ lives are at stake’ (Novacic 2016a). If the need for the separateness of ‘safe spaces’ is to be used as a justification for LGBTQ-affirming schools, it is imperative to explore whether it might be reasonable to view LGBTQ+ students as vulnerable or ‘at-risk’.

Academic and practitioner-led research over the last decade has provided extensive evidence that LGBTQ-identified children and young people have experienced significant levels of homophobia

within schools (Burdge, Licona, and Hemingway 2014; GLSEN 2014; Kosciw et al. 2011; Taylor et al. 2011; Rivers 2011). If this research is accepted, then it stands as a powerful justification for the need for 'safe spaces' for some LGBTQ-identified young people. However, scholars (Ellis 2007; McCormack 2012; Talburt 2004; Quinlivan 2002) have questioned research that exacerbates an image of a reassuringly distinct and tragic 'other'; what Monk (2011) refers to as 'the tragic gay'. This has often been the case when 'homophobic bullying' has been used as a means of construing the schooling experiences of LGBTQ youth (Rivers 2011; Hall 2018). Talburt (2004, p.117) offers an explanation for this divergence, arguing that educators and researchers have named 'homophobic persecution as a cause of LGBT youths' problems and their status as 'at-risk' as a justification for inclusive practices'.

Even if this discourse of vulnerability and risk were to be accepted, it is an insufficient justification for the existence of LGBTQ-affirming schools as *separate entities*. This is because there are several ways in which safe spaces for LGBTQ+ children and young people might be provided. One is to provide entirely separate LGBTQ-affirming schools, such as those identified in this paper. A second route might be to provide safe spaces *within* conventional schools, possibly through during-school pastoral care, after-school LGBTQ support groups, or Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) (see Sadowski 2016). The founder of Pride School explained that for him, the concept of 'being safe' was not enough; he wanted to create a 'thriving' space for young people. It is therefore important to explore the significance of positioning LGBTQ-affirming schools as separate entities; as 'other spaces'.

### **Foucault's heterotopias**

Scholars view schools not as purified spaces that nurture 'innocent' children, but as concentrated sites of contestation around issues of power and identity, and as key arenas for the production and regulation of sexual discourses, practices and identities (Renold 2005). They have 'unofficial cultures' through which young people learn about sexualities (Allen 2013). Schools, however, do not operate in a vacuum. They are part of a wider societal system, and as such, debates about gender and sexuality in schools are inextricably linked with issues of power, marginalisation and exclusion in

society (Hall 2018). Foucault's (2003) works on the 'practices of exclusion' are relevant here, as are his references to the 'norm' and the 'abnormal' (Foucault 2004; Ball 2013). Foucault (1986) describes how the world is saturated with places in which identities are prescribed and where spaces have particular meanings. He names heterotopias as 'counter-sites' within this framework, sites in which people 'struggle with norms' (Larssona, Quennerstedtb, and Öhmanb 2014, p.138). By way of contrast, 'utopias' are 'imaginary places beyond the real world' (Larssona, Quennerstedtb, and Öhmanb 2014, p.138). In this paper, the notion of heterotopias, of 'other spaces', is used as a theoretical lens through which to LGBTQ-affirming schools. By positioning LGBTQ-affirming schools as heterotopias, as counter-sites, it is possible to assess their relationship with conventional schools.

Foucault (1986) delineates heterotopias into categories; two of which are 'heterotopias of deviation' and 'heterotopias of crises'. Both of these could be seen as suitable descriptors of LGBTQ-affirming schools. The first are described as being places in which 'individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed' (Foucault 1986, p.25). Even though the word 'deviant' might be uncomfortable, and students are not 'placed' in Pride School, this classification might nonetheless be seen as fitting for the cohort of students targeted by LGBTQ-affirming schools (as posited by Rasmussen 2004). This argument is partially weakened, nonetheless, by the fact that LGBTQ-affirming schools are adamant that they are open to all students and not just those with non-heterosexual (or 'deviant') identities. The second classification, that of 'heterotopias of crises' could be seen as more appropriate, as these are for people experiencing 'a state of crises with respect to the society or the environment in which s/he lives' (Pattison 2015, p.629). This fits well with LGBTQ-affirming schools, especially those which use the discourse of vulnerability and expressly aim to cater for students who have experienced bullying, alienation or marginalisation elsewhere.

Using the lens of heterotopias is useful not as a point of philosophical conjecture, but because, by viewing LGBTQ-affirming schools as heterotopias, it is a way of examining their position within a wider school system. If they are identified as counter-sites, then they must be operating as counter

to something else; in this case, other schools. As such, they can be seen as ‘subversive sites’ which ‘undermine the ways things are normally done’ (Zembylas and Ferreirab 2009, p.4).

Data gathered throughout this research project indicated that Pride School did, to some extent, explicitly set up as a counter-site. Having spent time working in public schools, the founder expressed frustration that the education system had been slow to respond to the needs of LGBTQ+ children and families. He said: ‘We have waited long enough. I can’t wait any longer for the schools to change’. After long discussions with a friend, he was challenged to ‘Quit trying to fix other peoples’ schools and start your own school already’. Pride School clearly positions itself as an ‘alternative’ to other schools in both the public and private schooling sectors. In this case, ‘alternative’ does not simply mean different. Pride School is striving to be ‘better’, certainly in relation to the inclusion of LGBTQ+ students<sup>3</sup>. It might thus be conceptualised as a form of *resistance* or *protest* (Earl 2014). By its very existence, it offers a critique of the schooling system, as currently experienced by some LGBTQ+ children, young people and families.

Heterotopias are relational. They are ‘other spaces’ which are only understood in relation to something else. These counterparts are described by Foucault as utopias (1986), and they are slightly problematic in that they are ‘fundamentally unreal’; that is, they do not literally exist in a geographical place or space (Foucault 1986, p.24). The counterparts of LGBTQ-affirming schools are all other schools or forms of education, but these are, of course, as real as the LGBTQ-affirming schools themselves. They cannot, therefore, represent the utopias. The utopias must be ‘imaginary places’ (Larssona, Quennerstedtb, and Öhmanb 2014, p.138), and as such, are best illustrated by the *ideal* of inclusive education.

Many inclusive educators accept that the project of inclusive education is ‘a process’ rather than an ‘end product’ (Sebba and Ainscow 1996; Mittler 2000; Slee 2011). It has been variously described as ‘a vision’ (Barton 2003), as ‘polemic’ (Dyson 2012) and as ‘ideological’ (Slee 2011). This is summed up by Cigman (2007, p.780, emphasis in original) who posits these questions: ‘Schools ‘ought’ to

provide a satisfactory environment for every child; but *can* they? Is it *possible* to do what [inclusive educators] say schools ought to do?' There are many highly contested debates within the inclusive education field, many centring on this issue of whether it is possible and/or desirable to accommodate all children within a local, common 'school for all' (UNESCO 1994; Norwich 2013; Cigman 2007; Dyson 2012; Clark 1999; Kavale and Mostert 2004; Brantlinger 1997). It seems reasonable, therefore, to position the project of inclusive education as a utopia, as 'fundamentally unreal' (Foucault 1986), as an 'imaginary place' (Larssona, Quennerstedtb, and Öhmanb 2014). By establishing themselves as separate entities, LGBTQ-affirming schools 'undermine' or 'unstitch' (Johnson 2006, p.85) the ideal of inclusive education.

### **'Unstitching' inclusive education**

Although Pride School is strongly networked within the community in Atlanta, LGBTQ-affirming schools still operate as discrete entities, deliberately separating themselves and the students within them from the practices of other schools. The nature of this 'voluntary separation', as justified by Merry (2013, p.4), is to 'enhance the conditions necessary for equality and citizenship'. This paper has previously described these schools as a form of 'resistance' and 'protest' (Earl 2014; Clennon 2014). This aligns with arguments from critical pedagogues who argue that 'we must see the world through the eyes of the dispossessed and act against the ideological and institutional processes that reproduce oppressive conditions' (Apple, Au, and Gandin 2009, p.3). In this vision, 'school becomes the ally in their emancipation rather than their oppressor' (Earl 2014, p.3). This has some parallels with the quotation from the founder of Pride School in which he says that 'we have waited long enough' and 'start your own school already'. The community at Pride School are clearly motivated by a desire to provide something different – something better – than that which is offered in other schools.

Pride School has a vision for how they want to educate differently. Although it is too early to offer evidence as to whether they have been effective in this, it is clear that their intentions differ from

those of many other schools. First, they are based on a democratic, free school model which enables each student to design their own personalised programme. Second, staff members at Pride School have a desire to use a different, culturally responsive – and more inclusive - curriculum. One teacher, for example, wanted to ‘teach the whole story’ in her humanities lessons so that she could bring the experiences of LGBTQ+ people across history into the formal curriculum. In her previous teaching experiences in a number of public schools, she had felt pressure to present an edited version of history which did not draw attention to LGBTQ people or issues<sup>4</sup>. This critique of the curriculum in other schools is crucial in terms of understanding one of the ways that LGBTQ-affirming schools act as counter-sites which ‘undermine the ways things are normally done’ (Zembylas and Ferreirab 2009, p.4).

Extensive research has demonstrated that the design of curricula can privilege specific forms of knowledge and can reinforce structural inequality (Epstein and Johnson 1998; DePalma and Atkinson 2009; Letts and Sears 1999). Some histories, values and ways of ‘seeing the world’ become dominant whilst others stay invisible; an issue at the heart of culturally responsive pedagogy. This is fundamental in terms of understanding why LGBTQ-affirming schools are radically different from other schools, though this issue is pertinent to many marginalised groups of children, and not just those who identify as LGBTQ+. Stern and Hussain (2015, p.80) describe how ‘school educators in black schools were designing and delivering a *liberation-based* curriculum’ (emphasis added). The sense of this liberation-based curriculum is in contrast to heteronormativity<sup>5</sup>, the dominant discourse experienced by LGBTQ+ students in most schools. Heteronormativity has a notable impact on LGBTQ+ teachers and their professional identities (Ferfolja and Hopkins 2013), but in some countries, it has also been explicitly built into legislation, and consequently, into school systems. In US, these dominant ways of seeing the world are exemplified by the controversial ‘bathroom bills’ which attempt to mandate that children can only use the bathrooms that aligned with their assigned sex rather than their gender identity (Dart 2017).

By wanting to 'teach the whole story' where 'we can kind of arm them with a good strong sense of who they are, and that who they are is okay' (teacher), Pride School is striving to offer a form of liberation-based curriculum. This approach is quite different, in its very essence, from that used within many other schools. It adds to the argument that LGBTQ-affirming schools are counter-sites that operate as a form of resistance; in this case, as resistance to the heteronormativity that is embedded within the fabric of many schools.

## **Conclusion**

Over the past few decades, in an increasing number of countries in the Global North, school systems have developed in line with neo-liberalism so as to provide choice and competition, purportedly to drive up standards (Ball 2008; Saifer and Gaztambide-Fernández 2017). One consequence of this is that a variety of schools have become commonplace, including: faith-based schools; single gender schools; all-ability comprehensive schools; academically selective schools; schools with specialist curricula; schools for children who have been permanently excluded; schools for children with special educational needs; and – central to the arguments of this paper – LGBTQ- affirming schools. As these schools target specific cohorts of children and young people, they could be perceived as 'segregated' or at the least, of separating students from their peers. As such, they could be accused of undermining the vision of inclusive education as that of the provision of a single common 'school for all'.

This paper has used a theoretical framework including literatures on inclusive education, segregation and Foucault's heterotopias to investigate whether there is a place for LGBTQ-affirming schools within inclusive school systems. We have argued that a) segregation is different from separation; b) that the discourse of 'safe spaces' is important though not enough to justify these schools as separate spaces; c) positioning them as examples of Foucault's (1986) heterotopias enables them to be seen as sites of resistance and protest (Earl 2014). These 'counter-sites' serve to 'undermine' and 'unstitch' (Johnson 2006) the utopian vision of inclusive education.

Through characterising LGBTQ-affirming schools as 'other spaces', as heterotopias, it can be argued that they have an important function in the field of inclusive education. By 'unstitching' inclusive education, they challenge researchers and educators in other schools to re-consider theories and practices which aim to meet the needs of all students in school systems.

Word count: 7917

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<sup>1</sup> The terminology is important here, in particular, it is crucial to note that these schools are not LGBTQ-*only*. For the purpose of this paper, the phrase LGBTQ-affirming has been selected, even though Harvey Milk High School, Alliance School and Pride School Atlanta do not all explicitly use this term. HMHS describes themselves as 'a public school where some of the city's most at-risk youth — those who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) — could learn without the threat of physical violence and emotional harm they faced in a traditional educational environment'; Alliance School 'has a mission to reduce bullying' and uses the phrase 'gay-friendly'; Pride School aims to 'provide LGBTQQIAA students, families and educators a safe, fun and rigorous learning environment free of homophobia and transphobia'.

<sup>2</sup> 'Race' is in inverted commas as an acknowledgement that 'race' categories are socially rather than genetically constructed (for elaboration, see Back and Solomos 2000).

<sup>3</sup> (Pattison 2015) elucidates the argument that 'alternative' can be used to denote 'better' as well as 'different'

<sup>4</sup> This had included a suggestion that the name of Lesbos from a map of Greece so as to not draw attention to the word Lesbos or its associations with lesbianism

<sup>5</sup> 'the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent — that is, organized as a sexuality — but also privileged' (Berlant and Warner 1998, , p.548).