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What literary studies can offer sexuality education: Pre-service teachers' responses to an animated film

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Background: Given the high levels of homophobia that exist in South Africa, including in its schools and universities, it is imperative that university lecturers develop integrated and transdisciplinary curriculums to educate pre-service teachers about sexuality and to empower them to incorporate lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI)-inclusive resources into their own classrooms.

Aim: This study aimed to contribute to the scholarship of teaching and learning by reflecting on how English literary studies can contribute to sexuality education.

Setting: The context for this study is a specific undergraduate English module that forms part of the foundation phase and intermediate phase teacher education curriculums at the University of Johannesburg.

Methods: This study is a self-reflective analysis of how the methodology of close reading, which is central to English literary studies, can be used to support sexuality education.

Results: Despite the prevalence of homophobia in South African society, when undergraduate students in this English module ($n = 356$) were asked to write an essay about the representation of same-sex sexuality in a short animated film, none of them made homophobic comments.

Conclusion: Paying particular attention to the analytical methodology of close reading, the author argues that a narrow focus on the storytelling techniques used within a narrative text – in a way that deliberately excludes students' personal opinions about same-sex sexualities – offers a powerful way of facilitating a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of homophobia and heteronormativity.

Keywords: foundation phase; intermediate phase; teacher education; middle school; elementary school; 'In a Heartbeat'; literary studies; close reading; sex education; South Africa; LGBT; film studies; human rights education.

Introduction

While discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation has been constitutionally proscribed in South Africa since 1996, the country still remains deeply homophobic (Other Foundation 2015). In this article, I reflect on how a short animated gay-themed film can be a powerful resource in sexuality education. I argue that a narrow focus on a literary or visual text – in a way that deliberately forecloses on students' moral perspectives on same-sex sexuality – can facilitate inclusive perspectives on sexuality issues. I focus especially on students' essays about a short animated film, 'In a Heartbeat' (2017), written and produced by Bravo and David (2017). This 4-minute film, which has been viewed more than 23 million times on YouTube, depicts a shy schoolboy, Sherwin, who is attracted to another boy, Jonathan. His attraction is made visible through the personification of a heart, which playfully gets Jonathan's attention and literally pulls them together. The boys then move inside the school building, where the visible chemistry between the two attracts the disapprobation of their school peers, which results in the heart itself being torn asunder. What is striking about the students' responses to this particular visual text is that, despite the very high levels of homophobia in South African society (Other Foundation 2015), none of the students enrolled in the module in 2020 and 2021 ($n = 356$) articulated explicitly homophobic views in their essays about this film. This is fascinating, given the prevalence of homophobia in society, including among university students (Brown 2018; Brown, Maseko & Sedibe 2020; Tshilongo & Rothmann 2019). In this article, I discuss how the analytical methodology of close reading offered by literary studies, which emphasises a narrow focus on the text itself, coupled with a carefully crafted assignment question, can result in essays that reflect meaningfully

on the mechanisms and effects of homophobia. The focus, therefore, is on how heteronormativity and homophobia operate on a textual level as the students' assignment question itself forecloses on personal and moralistic reflections about same-sex sexuality.

The module that I reflect on in this article forms part of an undergraduate Bachelor of Education degree at the University of Johannesburg. Students studying to become foundation phase and intermediate phase teachers are required to complete six modules grouped together as English for the Primary School. The official institutional curriculum states that the purpose of these six modules is 'to guide students in developing their own English language competence and the requisite subject knowledge in English to enable them to support English language learning in the classroom' (UJ 2021:42). This dual focus of the module is grounded in the fact that many students who enter university lack the requisite English proficiency and academic literacy skills to engage meaningfully as students in an institution in which English is the language of teaching and learning (Ramsaroop & Petersen 2020; Van der Merwe 2018). This means that teaching and learning in the module focus on the development of advanced comprehension and composition skills, as students engage with academic articles and write academic essays, all the while as they revisit disciplinary content knowledge necessary for the primary school classroom. The thematic focus of this particular module is '[*p*]icturebooks and animated storytelling.' The goal is to introduce students to the scholarly literature about these two narrative genres, to inculcate a sincere enjoyment of literary texts (Fulani, Hendricks & McCarthy 2019) and to revisit the critical vocabulary needed to teach different genres of storytelling.

I argue that a literary or visual text that is incorporated into an English literature module can function as a supplementary resource to support sexuality education. The importance of this is twofold: firstly, it is important for university students to engage critically with texts that depict lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) issues, and secondly, it is important for student teachers to be empowered to identify and incorporate appropriate texts into their classroom practice. The student essays that I analysed suggest that the analytical methodology of close reading can produce in students both an empathetic response to individuals' experiences and an awareness of the mechanisms of heteronormativity. However, such a strategy, which deliberately does not consider students' existing worldviews, cannot exist in isolation and needs to be grafted onto a more comprehensive approach to teaching sexuality education. In other words, the integration of LGBTI-inclusive representations in literature modules does not negate the centrality of other powerful strategies for teaching students about same-sex sexualities. This needs to include, firstly on an epistemological level, the teaching of conceptual frameworks and terminology to facilitate an understanding of non-heteronormative sexualities and non-binary gender identities (Francis 2017a). This also needs to happen on a personal level, in which reflective exercises and dialogues can provide students with opportunities to interrogate 'unexamined areas of the self' (Francis & Hemson 2007:107). Unlike the approach that I describe in this article, the use of dialogues and self-reflection activities guide students towards understanding and unpacking their own prejudices and views (Francis 2021b). This approach, which centres on the participants' existing perspectives, has been very successfully used to inculcate an LGBTI-inclusive teaching philosophy through various activities, including through participatory discussions about media depictions (Brown 2020b; Clarke 2013; Helmer 2016), providing a platform for in-service teachers to share their perspectives and views (Bouley 2011; DePalma & Atkinson 2009; Taylor 2018) and through dialogues with LGBTI student peers (Brown 2020a; Dare 2019). While all these strategies centre a form of dialogic learning grounded in the students' individual perspectives, the approach described in this article – which draws on literary studies' use of a close reading methodology – deliberately forecloses on personal opinion, except insofar as it is relevant for the inevitably subjective interpretation of any narrative text.

In their broader discussion of human rights education, Du Preez, Simmonds and Roux (2012) distinguish between the implicit infusion of human rights, which is akin to a moral education orientated towards shifting the values of participants, on the one hand, and the explicit teaching of human rights, which focuses on the epistemological foundations of rights-based discourses, on the other hand. Furthermore, Du Preez et al. (2012) note that there are some educationalists who want human rights and values education to only be taught in the Life Orientation subject – a view that some people have about sexuality education specifically (Chaka, Beyers & Swanepoel 2019). However, as explained by Francis and Hemson (2007), social justice education needs multiple strategies to engage students and assist them in moving from knowing about rights to feeling inculcated into a community of practice grounded in a rights-based teaching philosophy. Given that Life Orientation textbooks have been found to be woefully inadequate in providing an inclusive sexuality education (Potgieter & Reygan 2012; Wilmot & Naidoo 2014), it is imperative that both teachers and teacher educators find ways to infuse LGBTI-inclusive resources across learning areas.

Homophobia in South African schools

A study conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council and The Other Foundation concluded that South Africa remains a deeply homophobic society. For instance, the study found that 72% of participants 'feel that same-sex sexual activity is morally wrong', only 55% said that they would 'accept' a gay family member and only 51% said that gay people should have the same rights as other citizens (Other Foundation 2015:iii). Research has consistently identified pervasive cultures of heteronormativity and homophobia in South African schools. In South Africa, many school teachers

have been found to be homophobic (Bhana 2012, 2014; Brown & Buthelezi 2020), and school management teams have been found to be inadequately prepared to provide support to learners with non-heteronormative sexualities or even recognise those learners and staff who may be in need of support (Brown & Buthelezi 2020; Francis & Msibi 2011). Moreover, heteronormativity and homophobia are also deeply rooted in the classroom and playground discourses of the learners themselves, at both primary school (Bhana & Mayeza 2016) and high school (Langa 2015; Msibi 2012) levels. This homophobia can be overt or take the form of microaggressions (Francis & Reygan 2016). While Francis (2017b) has positively observed that many teachers are willing to learn about non-heteronormative sexualities, and that straight allies and teachers are increasingly playing an important role in countering the dominant heteronormativity in South African schools (Francis 2021a), university lecturers need to infuse inclusive pedagogies and representations throughout our curriculums if we want to create truly inclusive spaces and empower teachers to provide LGBTI-affirming sexuality education.

Sexuality education in South Africa

Comprehensive sexuality education has a tenuous place in the South African school curriculum, with inadequate coverage in the formal curriculum and some topics entirely missing from policy documents (Francis 2017b). While the national Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) document stipulates that sex education should be taught from Grade 7 onwards (Department of Basic Education 2011a), many teachers report simply not covering the content at all (Bhana 2012; DePalma & Francis 2014a). The release of the Department of Basic Education's scripted lesson plans for comprehensive sexuality education in 2019 generated a moral panic among teacher unions, parents and some political parties (Matshili 2019; Rall 2019). Additionally, when sex education is taught in South African schools, it is almost unfailingly heteronormative (DePalma & Francis 2014b; Francis & Kuhl 2020). A survey conducted by the Other Foundation (2015:50) found that only 34% of South African respondents believe that 'learners should be taught about gay and lesbian rights at school.' It is significant that this reflects the proportion of people who want the *constitutional rights* of gay and lesbian people taught in schools. Presumably, the number of participants who would support same-sex relationships and sex itself being included in the curriculum would be even lower. Teachers themselves have expressed misgivings about policy uncertainty, insufficient resources and their own prejudices in this regard (Bhana 2012; DePalma & Francis 2014a). In fact, many teachers simply do not teach LGBTI-related content, even at high school level (Bhana 2012; DePalma & Francis 2014a). This problem is even more acute in primary schools, where teachers draw on the trope of 'childhood innocence' (Bhana 2008; Francis 2010) to justify their erasure of certain topics in sex education. Francis (2019b:406) elaborates on this trope and notes its paradoxical basis, in which 'teachers' discourses construct queer youth not only as innocent and childlike but also as hypersexual and rebellious.'

However, it is not only in the Life Orientation curriculum that same-sex sexualities are not addressed. There is a broader problem of 'same-sex sexualities [*being*] invisibilized' across the curriculums and institutional cultures of many schools (Francis & Kuhl 2020:5). As Francis (2017a) argues:

> [*T*]here is a long way to go if we want schools that affirm sexual diversity and that preclude discrimination on the basis of sexuality. If we do not continue to trouble the rampant heterosexism and heteronormativity in schools the status quo of teaching and learning about sexuality diversity and heterosexism will merely remain the same. (p. 146)

The invisibilisation (Francis & Kuhl 2020) of non-heteronormative sexualities in schools – in what Francis and Kuhl (2020:11) conclude is 'pedagogically oppressive' – contributes to an implicitly heteronormative worldview. The importance of visibility in challenging this heteronormativity cannot be overstated (Francis 2019a; Tshilongo & Rothmann 2019). As Clarke (2013) explains in relation to a school-based infusion of LGBTI literature:

> [*C*]onsidering pedagogical moments can assist to develop sexual literacies and encouraging empathy may allow those students who do not conform to the current heteronormative classroom to be understood and feel included. (p. 273)

Teacher education and the availability of resources

Two of the recurring challenges that have been identified in effecting a meaningful and inclusive sex education is inadequate teacher training and the absence of sufficient age-appropriate resources (Bouic 2019; DePalma & Francis 2014a; Johnson 2014; Venketsamy & Kinnear 2020). This problem is compounded by the fact that teachers in the intermediate phase are increasingly being expected to become generalists outside of specialised training (Woest 2018), often resulting in under-qualified teachers teaching Life Orientation (Francis 2017a). Venketsamy and Kinnear (2020) and Francis (2017a) also emphasise the need for more training and resources that are suitable for foundation phase sexuality education especially. 'In a Heartbeat', the short animated film that I am focusing on in this article, is an example of such a resource. While the CAPS curriculum for Life Orientation in the foundation phase does not stipulate the teaching of sexual orientation (Department of Basic Education 2011b), it does specify the teaching of 'relationships'. Thus, making pre-service teachers aware of free resources such as this short film could be powerfully leveraged into more inclusive LGBTI curriculums in primary school classrooms.

Given the centrality of teacher training curriculums in shaping the attitudes and competencies of teachers, Brown and Diale (2017) emphasise the need for making educational spaces inclusive for LGBTI teachers and learners, noting that

an 'urgency exists for teacher training programmes to incorporate knowledge on inclusive collegial atmospheres that are accommodative of same-sex sexualities' (Brown & Diale 2017:2). Thus, the inclusion of 'In a Heartbeat' in one specific module is not only about empowering pre-service teachers with the skills to identify and assess age-appropriate resources for their own future practice, but also about shifting the attitudes of student teachers themselves about same-sex sexualities. Francis and Kuhl (2020) point to the difficulties of such an undertaking, arguing that:

> [*T*]he challenge is whether pre-service and in-service teacher education programs are able to develop teachers with these critical consciousness capabilities and engaged pedagogies, and to sustain them in social contexts that may be hostile to any discussion about sex, sexuality and relationships. (p. 16)

Literary studies and close reading

While there is no single approach to the teaching of literary and visual texts, the particular module that I focus on in this article emphasises close reading as an analytical methodology. In his seminal *How to Read Literature,* Eagleton (2013:ix) argues for an approach to narrative texts that pays 'close attention to literary form and technique'. Grounded in the approach to literary texts advocated by the New Critics school (Abrams 2005:189), close reading refers to 'the detailed analysis of the complex interrelationship and *ambiguities* (multiple meanings) of the verbal and figurative components within a work' (Abrams 2005:189). While this analytical approach was initially used for written narrative texts broadly considered to have literary and artistic merit, it has since been used to study a range of narrative genres, including films. This approach to a narrative text – in which a reader pays close attention to the interpretive possibilities of specific words and phrases (in the case of written narratives) and visible symbols, facial expressions, and so on (in the case of visual texts) – is also a powerful resource in teaching comprehension skills (Duck 2018). The students' essays that I am focusing on in this article were written in response to a very specific question, one which deliberately foreclosed on students' personal attitudes towards sexuality. By doing so, students were compelled to focus their attention on how a specific narrative text explores same-sex sexualities, rather than offer their own views on the topic. Students were given the following assignment question:

> Write an essay … in which you discuss how the different elements of storytelling are used both to depict and challenge the theme of homophobia in the short film 'In a Heartbeat' (2017). Your essay could, for example, focus on specific examples of some of the following aspects of the short animated film: plot, setting, personification, characterisation, and symbolism. You could also reflect on the music in the film. Remember that you should not simply describe what happens in the film, but should include a discussion of how specific aspects of the film work to explore the theme of homophobia.

To further circumscribe the range of analytical responses to the film, and to recentre the academic literacy skills that are prioritised in the module, students were instructed to include quotations and paraphrased ideas from the given extracts to support their responses:

> While the central problem in books with gay and lesbian characters historically has been homosexuality, in many contemporary lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender-queer (LGBTQ) novels homophobia is the overarching 'problem' […]. As such, authors have sought to promote inclusion of nonnormative sexual and gender identities and to present such characters as positive, ordinary, cool, even normal. In order to problematise homophobia, however, authors frequently create antagonists with homophobic attitudes and behaviours. […] Heteronormative assumptions, including homophobic attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours, provide the root of the internal and external conflict for the characters in the majority of LGBTQ-themed books. (Wickens 2011:153)

> [*M*]ost contemporary texts that incorporate LGBTQ characters and conflicts […] work to challenge and undermine normalised assumptions around gender and sexuality, especially the homophobic attitudes and behaviour they engender […]. Most contemporary novels attempt to do this by creating empathetic characters, villainizing homophobic behaviours and characters, and even using the narrative in part as a 'how-to' manual to familiarise the reader on different aspects of LGBTQ identities and conflicts […]. They situate these issues in contemporary realistic settings with which readers are likely to identify. (Wickens 2011:160)

While the primary purpose of including these extracts was to facilitate academic literacy skills, it is also important in light of Uys, Romylos and Nel's (2021) assertion that the impact of including LGBTI-themed narrative texts can be compounded when they are juxtaposed with other readings that shape the reception of the text. The inclusion of these extracts also speaks to Helmer's (2016:37) assertion that we need to 'mov[*e*] beyond reading practices that continue to teach about or for the "other" towards readings that trouble privileging/othering practices as well as commonsense hegemonic constructions of normative sexualities'. Given that the importance of students writing essays about 'In a Heartbeat' is not so much about mastery of this specific narrative text but rather about their ability to reflect on a range of visual repertoires through which same-sex sexualities are depicted (Govender & Andrews 2021; Helmer 2016), the inclusion of these extracts in the question also emphasises the transferability of their newly developed critical perspective on LGBTI representations.

Methodology

Given that the focus of this article is not on the students' argumentative skills or English proficiency, and that none of the essays evidenced homophobia, all 356 essays were eligible for inclusion in this article. This is not to say that the results are universally generalisable or that a different group of students might not have included homophobic perspectives in their responses. The extracts that are discussed here were taken from essays selected through purposive and convenience sampling. In total, 30 students' essays were identified, ensuring only that the selected essays reflected a range of marks, ranging from essays that failed to essays that

were awarded distinctions. Of these 30 students, only 22 responded to my request for permission to quote from their essays, and it is from these essays that the extracts below have been taken. Of course, my consideration of the essays was not informed by the students' personal views about same-sex sexualities. It is not my claim, therefore, that the specific essays that were analysed in this article reflect a direct causal shift in the attitudes of the specific students from whose essays I quote. Rather, I discuss a range of extracts to illustrate how the student cohort broadly engaged with the textual and contextual mechanics of homophobia in a school setting. It is also not my claim that the writing of an essay grounded in close reading of a film has irreversibly shifted all students' perspectives surrounding same-sex sexualities. I am arguing instead that the use of close reading as an analytical methodology explicitly prevented students from offering individualised moralist perspectives on the topic, and guided them instead towards assessing the effects and machinations of homophobia in a school setting.

Student responses: 'In a Heartbeat' (2017)

The module focuses, in part, on revising students' understanding of the elements of storytelling, such as characterisation, setting, symbolism, personification and plot, which will be necessary for their teaching of literature to primary school learners. Not unexpectedly then, these constituent parts of storytelling were used by most of the students to structure their argumentative essays.

Characterisation

Describing the opening scene in which Sherwin is shown watching Jonathan from afar, one student reflects that:

> '[*The*] scene challenges homophobia as it forces us to address presumptuous misconceptions of the LGBTQ community for example, the myth that members of the LGBTQ community can be identified by their physical features or the way in which they act.' (Student 1, 14 May 2020)

Again drawing on the absence of stereotypical depictions in this particular film, another student offers a fascinating insight that:

> '[*Sherwin's*] red hair is the only thing that reflects an aspect of being gay, and that is how rare it may actually be. Being a red-head is not as common as being a blonde or brunette, and this is a cute way of reflecting another way [*how*] homophobia can be perceived. Red-heads can be teased and called derogatory names, simply for the virtue that the shade of their hair is uncommon. This does not mean that there is anything wrong with them. It just shows how those unfamiliar with it may be more intolerant. This is a direct reflection of the attitude of homophobia.' (Student 2, 14 May 2020)

After describing how Sherwin is 'a shy and anxious inexperienced boy in middle school who tries frantically to hide and stay unnoticed by the other boy for whom he harbours secret romantic feelings', one of the students writes:

> 'This is significant as it allows the viewer to relate to the character Sherwin as every person has experienced having secret feelings for someone else and trying to have those feelings remain unknown to the other person. It also helps to emphasise to the viewer on the childlike innocence behind having feelings for a classmate and not knowing how to respond.' (Student 3, 14 May 2020)

This response – in which the film's depiction of the everydayness of adolescent attraction is universalised beyond the confines of heteronormativity – was not an uncommon observation across many of the essays. In this particular instance, the trope of childhood innocence that is so often used to legitimise the erasure of sexuality education in the primary school (Bhana 2008; Francis 2010) is reinterpreted, noting that awkwardness about physical or romantic attraction is constitutive of childhood, irrespective of sexuality, rather than incompatible with it. Extending this point further – and with particular implications given that the students are studying to become primary school teachers – one of the students explains that:

> 'The film makers use the redhead as an "empathetic character", "to challenge and undermine normalised assumptions around gender and sexuality [...]" (Wickens 2011:160). Children are usually exposed to animation and literature that only have room for heterosexuality, watching this film introduces them to a new fact that being in love with someone of the same sex is as "normal" as it is for two people of the opposite sex.' (Student 4, 14 May 2020)

In this instance, the prescribed extract has further guided the students towards a particular analysis of the film. This is similarly affected when one of the students writes:

> 'Heteronormative assumptions, including homophobic attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours, provide the root of the internal and external conflict for the characters in the majority of LGBTQ-themed books" (Wickens 2011:153). This is also the case for Sherwin. Not only was he having an internal conflict regarding coming out but he now also has to face society which will probably judge him.' (Student 5, 14 May 2020)

Setting

As part of this module, students are taught how to distinguish between spatial setting, temporal setting and social setting, the latter referring to the cultural values of a particular environment or circumstance (Abrams 2005:294). In this respect, students' analyses of the short film emphasised the interdependence of spatial setting and social setting. The focus on how setting depicts homophobia was often approached rather literally, with many students noting the homophobia of the learners in the school. Significantly – although not unsurprisingly given the focus of the question and the analytical methodology of close reading – the students' essays are all very negative about the homophobic learners depicted in the film:

> 'According to Wickens (2011:153) authors create a problem around homophobia by making the antagonists to portray homophobic attitudes and behaviours. This can be witnessed in the film with how the children's facial expressions and their body language displays disgust and disapproval proving that the children are being homophobic towards the two boys.' (Student 6, 14 May 2020)

> 'The students are explored as villains as they are not sympathetic and are visibly unaccepting of homosexual attraction.' (Student 3, 14 May 2020)

Significantly, given that the students are future primary school teachers, many of them pay particular attention to those features of the school that make it an especially powerful component of the machinations of homophobia:

> 'Schools are supposed to be the place where everyone is treated the same but some learners at school are homophobic because they were exposed to homophobic mindset and behaviour. At school learners must be taught about not being homophobic because they don't understand the pain the others feel when they are judged and discriminated by them.' (Student 7, 14 May 2020)

> '[*T*]he setting of the film is entirely within the school environment, this calls attention to the lack of awareness young people in schools have towards homosexuality and as a results manifests into homophobia.' (Student 8, 14 May 2020)

> 'The way that the individuals in his school look at him when they found out shows that indeed that they really do have homophobic attitudes. It also tells us that homophobic attitudes start from a young age since it all happens in the school premises.' (Student 9, 14 May 2020)

Whereas the vast majority of the students focused simply on how the school was a setting for *depicting* homophobia, some of the students demonstrated more advanced skills of textual analysis and offered particularly original insights about how the film also *challenges* homophobia. In one striking response, which points to the way in which specific spaces can create conditions for visibility (Rothmann 2018), a student comments on the fact that the setting is divided between the school building and the gardens outside:

> 'The 2 settings are Nature versus the Establishment. The first time we see the boys interact, curiously and very shyly, is outside. Not only were there no other people around, but there is also the convention of 'letting nature take its course.' Their attractions and interactions were not forced, nor were they bad: they simply were. Outside in nature they had the freedom to explore what felt right for them, and they could be honest about the fact that they were drawn to each other. Not only were they alone together, but nature was bright. Their interactions were beautiful in the light. Inside on the other hand, the scene got darker and duller. The school building is a construct made by society where, rather ironically, children are thought to think in a particular way. The intolerance of homosexuality is established as a learned understanding. Here their natural course could not be followed anymore as cold eyes and whispers turn what they are just finding into something shameful. Something disgraceful. Something ugly. Within these rigid walls is also the only place where other people were in the film. This is an interesting way to convey that socialisation is relational: people are the establishment.' (Student 2, 14 May 2020)

Similarly, a student remarks on how the school bell is constitutive of the setting, in both a literal and figurative way:

> 'Children are raised according to the expectations of society. The school bell represents the expectations of society; also serves as a warning. The school bell is used to alert school pupils that their current lesson has ended and that it is time for a new lesson to begin; the children automatically move on to their next class rather than ask what the time is. In this way, the two boys are supposed to follow society's expectations as demonstrated by the dark-hair boy. The bell serves as a warning as it can be heard in the surrounding areas. This fact contributes to the subject homophobia as loving a person of the same sex is defying those expectations, resulting in children growing up to be unaccepting towards LGBTQ community.' (Student 10, 14 May 2020)

Reflecting on temporal setting and making an insightful point that hints at an authorial hopefulness about the relationship between and affirmation of the two boys, a student wrote:

> 'In a Heartbeat is set at the beginning of a school day a rather ordinary setting but from the words of Wickens this is typical as "They situate these issues in contemporary realistic settings with which readers are likely to identify" (Wickens 2011:160) and the significance is that firstly a new day is seen as something that hold countless, hopeful opportunities.' (Student 11, 14 May 2020)

Symbolism

The most prominent symbol in the film is the personification of the heart. Given that sexuality education needs to extend beyond just safety and sexual health, and instead also focus explicitly on desire (Francis 2010, 2019b), it is significant that most students were willing to articulate the potency of the underlying desire of which the heart was a symbol:

> 'The heart has prominent eyes and an innocent smile and embodies a childlike essence about it in the way it enthusiastically pursues the other boy. It points eagerly to the other boy and drags the protagonist to allow him to confront and confess his feelings. This allows the boys to hold hands and almost share a kiss. This is significant because the love or attraction between the boys is not biased, limited or something that can be controlled. The filmmakers' approach to making the heart very childlike allows the viewer to observe the innocence behind having a middle school crush and to normalise the fact that it is a same-sex attraction between two young boys who are just as significant and should be treated equally when compared to a heterosexual attraction.' (Student 3, 14 May 2020)

> 'Although he was hiding, his heart was still out there going for what it wants. Here we can see that homosexual people ten[*d*] to go through the hardships of being who they are, most of the time they do not experiment an environment that involves their identities and celebrating and valuing the diversity of their experiences and lives.' (Student 12, 14 May 2020)

> 'This is where viewers get to understand that it is wrong to judge people. We also see that homophobia is challenged because they decided to end up together regardless of what the other children thought when they discovered that the two boys have feelings for each other.' (Student 13, 14 May 2020)

> 'Seeing how relatable, funny or silly and impossibly dangerous the child protagonist's feelings are, creates a sense of acceptance that also leads the viewer to seeing that what the romantic interests of [*homosexuals*] are the essentially the same.' (Student 14, 14 May 2020)

The framing of this particular observation, in which heteronormativity is collapsed in favour of a universalised notion of attraction, is important, given Dinkins and Englert's

(2015) warning that the use of LGBTI-inclusive resources in the classroom does not on its own counter the othering of gay characters. How resources are used is perhaps as important as the resources themselves.

In addition to the personification of the heart, which comes to symbolise Sherwin's desire for Jonathan, the other poignant and oft-discussed symbol in the film is the dustbin (where Sherwin hides when he thinks his same-sex attraction has been noticed). Given the power of literature and film to generate empathy and compassion in audiences (Barton et al. 2019; Clarke 2013; Helmer 2016; Skouge & Rao 2009), the dustbin is a particularly powerful symbol in this film. Evidencing this deeply empathetic investment in the experiences of Sherwin, students wrote, for instance:

> 'He didn't hide next or behind the dustbin, but he went inside it as if he belonged there. When people feel judged, they usually feel worthless because they failed to reach the society's standards of "normal." When the boy went to hide inside the dustbin, he felt like he didn't belong in the society since he was attracted to a male. He had failed to be part of the "normal," the heterosexual people. Him going inside the dustbin was because he felt like trash/rubbish. He felt like that's where he belongs, with the rubbish in the dustbin. If the school wasn't homophobic, neither of the boys would've been afraid to be themselves.' (Student 15, 14 May 2020)

> 'It seems like the closed rubbish can represents feelings of people that have been closed up just because of fear of rejection/embarrassment, being looked at as weird and not normal just because they love "differently" than the others deemed normal (Boy & Girl/Girl & Boy, nothing else). Still the heart here manages to open the lid of the rubbish can from where they were hiding (shows how strong this boys feelings are) the hearts opens, breaks all barriers to get what it wants despite the beliefs of the society.' (Student 16, 14 May 2020)

> '[*A*]nother possibility is he could feel in this case is hiding in a dustbin because he feels the fear of being unwanted and usually people throw dirt in the dustbin.' (Student 17, 14 May 2020)

Again revealing a hopefulness in the outcome of the boys' relationship, a student reflects on the symbolism of the doors that separate the physical school building from the gardens:

> 'The directors further use the symbol of a door to symbolise opportunities. Open doors in literature are used as symbols of new opportunities. In the last scene, we see the other boy closing a door behind the heart that's following him. To the other boy, this might mean that he is closing or shutting off what has just happened in the school pathways, but to the heart the opening of the door means one more opportunity to convince the boy that he has feelings for him.' (Student 18, 14 May 2020)

Conclusion

In order to develop a truly inclusive sexuality curriculum, our interventions as university lecturers need to happen at the level of *opinion* (what teachers think about same-sex sexualities), the level of *resources* (what teachers can use to teach about sexuality, and the skills necessary to identify age-appropriate texts) and at the level of *epistemology* (the terminology and concepts related to gender and sexuality). The specific assignment that I focus on in this article addresses only the first two of these, pointing to the importance of an integrated approach to LGBTI-inclusive teaching across teacher education curriculums. While Francis (2017a:145) clearly argues for the importance of developing a terminology-rich conceptual understanding of sexuality and gender, he also cites Kumashiro's point that '[*t*]o create change requires disruptive knowledge, not simply more knowledge.' Through the use of a close reading analytical methodology that is foundational to literary studies, it is shown how students are guided towards a reading of the film that disrupts – however briefly – their personal knowledge about sexuality. As Helmer (2016) explains, while it is imperative to create spaces for personal views and discomfort to be explored, it is equally important that we 'recognis[*e*] as legitimate bodies of knowledge and mak[*e*] the focus of inquiry the stories, experiences, cultures, histories and politics of LGBTQI people' and that we 'develop[…] an understanding of the dynamics of oppressions related to normative systems of regulation of sexuality.' Literary studies, then, needs to become a constituent part of a broader transdisciplinary sexuality curriculum.

While it is not possible to infer, from the vantage point of this study, the extent to which long-term shifts took place from students' perspectives, it is important to note that the pedagogical potential of what I propose does not lie in a singular textual intervention. Rather, this article focuses on a strategy that not only exposed pre-service teachers to LGBTI-affirming narrative texts but also modelled how these can be incorporated into a broader sexuality curriculum. That being said, whether the use of close reading in a module for pre-service teachers can be transposed onto the primary school classrooms in which these students will one day teach, depends on the specific grade, context and narrative text. McCarthy (2020) explains the 'split consciousness' that is necessary to both teach literary texts to university students and equip those students with the skills necessary to translate that knowledge when in their primary school classrooms. In other words, the students need to be able to adjust their own experience of being taught to match the context-specific demands of actually teaching. With this in mind, one cannot argue that a narrow focus on a narrative text will always be an effective pedagogical strategy in all primary school classrooms. Rather, the intervention described in this article is specifically relevant for teacher education programmes, even as it may also model a pedagogical strategy through which controversial topics can be explored by teachers themselves.

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Author's contributions

The author declares that he is the sole author of this research article.

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Data availability

The students' essays are subject to the conditions set in the ethical clearance application and in the participants' informed consent forms. Thus, the full essays are not available for distribution.

Disclaimer

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