Queer English Language Teacher Identity:
A Narrative Exploration in Colombia

Identidad queer de profesores de inglés:
una exploración narrativa en Colombia

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This article presents partial results of research exploring links between language teacher identity and queer identity in English language teachers working in Colombia. Three gay male teachers participated in a narrative research project framed within a poststructural perspective on identity. I conducted and recorded semi-structured interviews with the participants and then carried out a thematic analysis of these interviews which led to the emergence of three main themes. Here, I present the most prevalent theme, that of being a gay language teacher in the Colombian context which reveals that the participants all live their queer identity alongside their language teacher identity with ease although they do recount instances of homophobia which have impacted their day-to-day lives and their careers.

Key words: Identity, language teacher identity, queer identity.

Este artículo presenta resultados parciales de un estudio que exploró las relaciones entre la identidad del profesor de lenguas y la identidad queer en docentes de inglés que trabajan en Colombia. Tres profesores gais participaron en un estudio narrativo enmarcado en una perspectiva post-estructuralista de la identidad. Para recolectar los datos se realizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas con los participantes y se llevó a cabo un análisis temático que condujo a tres categorías emergentes. Este artículo se enfoca en el tema principal, ser un profesor de lenguas gay en el contexto colombiano. Esta categoría devela que los participantes viven su identidad queer con su identidad como profesores de lenguas cómodamente, aunque se refieren a momentos de homofobia que han impactado su vida diaria y sus carreras.

Palabras clave: identidad, identidad del profesor de lenguas, identidad queer.

Introduction

The recent "social turn" in applied linguistics has seen sociocultural theory applied to English language teaching (see Lantolf & Thorne, 2006) which has in turn meant an increasing focus on the teacher-student and student-student interactions in the language learning process. Many factors are at play in these interactions including language teacher identity (LTI). I became interested in LTI when, as a foreigner, I observed that a large number of my English teaching colleagues openly identified as gay or lesbian, something which conflicted with my impression of Colombia as a traditionally conservative society. My curiosity about this prompted me to design my master's research project to find out if any connection existed between these teachers' language teacher identities and their sexual orientation. My guiding research questions were:

1. Are there connections between language teacher identities and queer identities?

2. What influence does the Colombian context have on these identities?

I use the term "queer" in order to associate the project with the existing research on non-heteronormative identities that has drawn on poststructuralism and queer theory. However, the participants all refer to themselves as "gay" so I use that term when referring to their sexual identities with the understanding that this is one of the referents of queer.

This article will focus on the second research question, placing context at the forefront. With this in mind, it is relevant to mention that despite the traditionally conservative nature of Colombian society, people who identify as lesbian or gay in Colombia have seen significant moves towards equality with their heterosexual peers under the law. The LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) knowledge base Equaldex (2016) lists that, for example, in Colombia same-sex couples are recognised as the legal parents of their children; same-sex marriage was legalised in 2016 and transgender people

can serve openly in the Colombian military. Colombia is thus one of the most progressive countries in Latin America regarding LGBT rights. This study aimed to investigate whether or not this was reflected in the reality of the lived experiences of gay language teachers in Colombia.

Literature Review

The Nature of Identity

It was following Norton's (1995) seminal article that researchers in the field of applied linguistics began to turn their attention to the topic of identity. Since then, applied linguistics has taken a "broadly poststructural approach to identity" (Block, 2007, p. 863) reflected in Norton and Toohey's (2011) definition of identity as "diverse, contradictory, dynamic and changing over historical time and social space" (p. 417). Such has been the interest in identity research that Block (2013) wrote of the field being "immersed in identity" (p. 14). This immersion has provided no shortage of definitions of identity. Aneja (2016) stated that, "individuals' identities are dynamic and encompass individual agency and the local and community context, as well as connections to global discourses and ways of making sense of the world" (p. 574). Gray (in press) concurs, stating that "identities are plural and dynamic; that they emerge (or are constructed or performed) in social interaction; that they are sensitive to context; and that they are relational" (p. 9). Furthermore, the vital role of language in identity creation is clearly illustrated by Norton (2010),

> Every time we speak we are negotiating and renegotiating our sense of self in relation to the larger social world and reorganising that relationship across time and space. Our gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, among other characteristics, are all implicated in this negotiation of identity. (pp. 350)

It is within this poststructural framework, understanding identity as something multifactorial that is in constant development, constructed in social processes

using language and influenced by social context, that I pursued the project. Despite the acknowledged fluctuating, evolving nature of identity, Gray (in press) asks how,

> can identity be said to entail a temporary point of attachment to a subject position (and therefore to some extent be inherently ephemeral) *and* at the same time be used to discuss more enduring senses of self in terms of gender, race and class? (pp. 10-11)

The existence of these "enduring" factors appears to contradict the idea that identity is something in constant evolution. Gray (2016) answers his own question when explaining that some facets of identity could be described as "sedimented" (p. 232) because an individual has the experience of doing, or living this facet over and over again for a long period of time in their life so that for them it has developed constancy. This implies that for most people some aspects, such as identification with a particular group, may seem temporary, while other factors, like gender that is perpetually repeated over time, appear to be permanent.

Language Teacher Identity

Turning specifically to LTI, Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, and Johnson (2005) argued the importance of research in this topic when they describe that learning processes involve "the teacher's whole identity" (Varghese et al., 2005, p. 22). They explained that teacher identity is a "critical component in the sociocultural and sociopolitical landscape of the language classroom" and a "crucial component in determining how language teaching is played out" (Varghese et al., 2005, p. 22). In the 2016 special edition of *TESOL Quarterly* the editors begin with a quote from Clark (2009) who suggested that as a profession we ought to make a "serious recognition that our work as teachers shapes and is shaped by our very mode of being" thus "thinking about the formation of our identities is crucial for all of us in education" (p. 186). These authors clearly emphasise the critical role of LTI and argue strongly that research into this topic

is a crucial pursuit in order to fully understand the processes of language teaching.

Varghese et al. (2005) proposed three principal factors in the construction of language teacher identity: its inherent instability; the social, cultural, and political setting; and language.

Within the first factor, the idea that identity is not fixed, the authors emphasised the "primacy of *agency*" (Varghese et al., 2005, p. 23) which allows individuals to have a central role in shaping their own identities. Although agency is undoubtedly an integral part of a poststructural view of identity, it is important to remember that in the professional domain language teachers are likely to be influenced by the rules and norms of the institutions where they work. Language teachers will possibly have to follow rules that force them to act in a certain way as discussed by Moore, Edwards, Halpin, and George (2002).

The second factor Varghese et al. (2005) discussed is the impact of the social, cultural, and political setting on identity thus furthering the possible role of a teacher's workplace on their identity formation. They make the distinction between those aspects of identity that a person assigns to her/himself, "*claimed identity*", and those aspects that are bestowed upon individuals by external sources, "*assigned identity*" (Varghese et al., 2005, p. 23), which inevitably include a person's place of work. Finally, they stated that "identity is constructed, maintained and negotiated to a significant extent through language and discourse" (Varghese et al., 2005, p. 23). They illustrate the importance of this by invoking the subjugation carried out by the labelling of teachers as non-native-speakers. Varghese et al.'s three factors reflect the general theories of identity formation discussed above.

Queer Identity

Nelson (1999), while recognising the tradition of identity research in applied linguistics, decried the neglect of sexual identity issues. More than 15 years later a search of the literature reveals existing teacher identity

research (Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Trent, 2016; Tsui, 2007) but also exposes continued neglect of teachers' gendered and sexual identities. This is particularly evident in Colombia where there is almost no evidence of research into sexual identity issues in either the databases or the prominent English language teaching journals. In Rondón's (2012) study, LGBT students reported feeling ill at ease in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom as they are constantly concerned about revealing their sexuality. Rondón suggests that this impacts directly upon their participation in activities and ultimately on the development of their language skills. Some research has also been done concerning gender identity and its role in the language learning process (see Castañeda-Peña, 2008). Although Nelson (2004, 2009) has since explored the topic, it is obvious that the call for research on queer language teacher identity made by Varghese, Motha, Park, Reeves, and Trent (2016) reflects a continuing and urgent need for examination of the topic.

The term "queer", "a broad term for a wide range of non-normative sexual and gender identifications" (Gray, 2016, p. 225), is used as a counterpoint to heteronormativity which Cameron and Kulick (as cited in Gray, 2016) defined as "those structures, institutions, relations and actions that promote heterosexuality as natural, self-evident, desirable, privileged, and necessary" (p. 225). Nelson (1999, p. 374) reported that the term queer has two functions. Firstly, it dispenses with essentialist labels of sexual identity thus promoting a more poststructural perspective, and secondly, it acts as a kind of shorthand for individuals who do not conform to heteronormativity. These two functions create a tension; on the one hand signifying a reaction against labelling of people but at the same time being a label. In the academic realm the role of queer theory, according to Nelson (1999), is inquiry, seeking to expose the ways in which sexual identities are created by language and culture and the ways in which these perpetuate heteronormativity. Nelson (1999) exemplified a poststructural perspective

on queer identity when she stated that "sexual identities are facts not acts, they are not what people are, but what they do" and that "it is difficult to separate sexual identity from other acts of identity because identities are not just multiple but are mutually inflicting" (p. 376). She also affirmed that "interacting socially and discursively involves producing and interpreting sexual identities" (Nelson, 1999, p. 375). This framework is thus highly relevant when considering data gathered in oral interviews which can be considered as sites of the production and interpretation of identity.

Disclosure of Queer Identity

The act of "coming out" demonstrates the divide experienced by queer language teachers between who they are inside and who they are outside the classroom. Nelson (1999) argues that for heterosexual teachers, declarations of their sexual identities are a natural, everyday occurrence. They need only make a comment about what they did at the weekend with their husband or wife and children for them to incorporate their sexual identity into their teacher identity without thinking. In contrast queer teachers have to make a deliberate decision about whether or not it is appropriate to reveal this information about themselves.

Nelson (2004) explains how a poststructural perspective on identity problematizes the act of coming out for queer language teachers. If identity is in endless flux, then there is no stable, pre-existing queer identity for these teachers to reveal in class. However, as discussed above, most teachers experience their sexuality as constant due to the phenomenon of sedimentation described by Gray (2016). Therefore, the reality is that teachers who do not fit into the heteronormative mould are in fact forced to decide whether to reveal this in class or not.

Nelson's (2009) research found divergent opinions among teachers about whether it was appropriate to come out in the classroom. Some felt that it was essential as "sexual identity was integral to every part of life" (p. 99)

whereas others felt that it should remain private. Kanno and Stuart (2011) insisted that "becoming an L2 teacher requires the commitment of the self, not just playing an assigned role in the classroom" (p. 239). They implied that a teacher must incorporate all aspects of their identity into their work, presumably including their queer identity, thus requiring teachers to come out. This stance seems to ignore that in some parts of the world admitting to non-heteronormative sexual identity in the classroom might be dangerous for teachers, putting them at risk of both losing their job and physical harm. This is recognised by Lipkin (as cited in Donahue, 2007) who commented that the act of coming out was "the last frontier, a leap into a wholly different territory marked by serious taboos" (p. 81).

Despite this danger, Kupfer (2000) concluded that a certain level of intimacy is required between teacher and student to engage students and to facilitate the learning process. Kupfer detailed the positive sequelae she attributes to revealing her sexuality in the classroom: LGBT students feel more included, she provides an authentic example of a lesbian for the students who would otherwise resort to stereotypes to inform their perceptions, and finally she says that honesty is demonstrated as an integral value of the classroom.

Method

I collected the data presented and discussed in this article in the first semester of 2016 as part of my master's dissertation project. This article focuses, as already mentioned, on my second research question exploring the lived experience of gay English language teachers in Colombia.

Following Creswell (2007) a narrative research approach was taken. He describes narrative research as "studying one or two individuals, gathering data through the collection of their stories, reporting individual experiences, and chronologically ordering … the meaning of those experiences" (p. 54). The oral interviews conducted yielded data resembling Creswell's personal experience story which "is a narrative study of an individual's personal experience found in single or multiple episodes, private situations, or communal folklore" (p. 55). Barkhuizen (2014), referring to language teaching, states that narrative research "is concerned with the stories teachers and learners tell about their lived and imagined experiences" (p. 450). This approach therefore suited my priority to focus on the individuals, their stories, and their experiences. There was no intention to focus on any particular predetermined issue. Additionally, Reissmann (as cited in Menard-Warwick, 2011) asserts that "a central function of narrative is the construction of identities" (p. 565) thus demonstrating the appropriateness of this approach in identity research.

The Participants

Participant selection was carried out using Creswell's (2007) homogenous and convenience sampling criteria. I approached the three male EFL teachers who agreed to participate in the study because I knew that they identified themselves as gay and were open about this with their colleagues. I hoped that this openness would make them willing to discuss the interaction between their sexual identities and their professional identities. Two of the teachers are in their early thirties and the third is in his early fifties. One works in a public school and private university, and the other two work in a public university. All of the teachers are Colombian; two of them graduated with the same undergraduate degree in foreign language teaching from a public university in Colombia and the third studied a previous version of the programme. At the time of the study two of the teachers had a master's degree and one was in the final stages of his master's. As long ago as 1990, Rampton argued that the term non-native speaker should be supplanted by other terms. However, I will designate these three teachers as non-native speakers of English because Colombian research journals demonstrate that the term non-native speaker is still in use in the Colombian context and because the participants refer

to themselves as such. All participants signed a consent form and pseudonyms have been used to preserve their anonymity.

Data Collection

I conducted three hour-long, semi-structured interviews with each participant, thus collecting three narratives, each lasting for three hours. The reason for collecting the narratives over three interviews is described by Seidman (1991). The first interview functions as an ice-breaker, allowing the interviewer and interviewee to establish a relationship and allowing for a broad overview of the narrative to be recounted. In the second interview, the interviewee should be encouraged to go into more detail about parts of the narrative that the interviewer identifies as pertinent for the study. Finally, the third interview is conceived as an opportunity for both parties to clarify any doubts or ask any questions to complete the narrative.

In collecting the data, I wished to ensure the participants' sense of freedom and ease to talk. The subject matter made it imperative that the participants felt comfortable and able to share their reflections on this topic with the researcher. Polkinghorne (2005) explained that "researchers need to demonstrate to the participant that it is safe to be open and revealing of deeply personal feeling and information" (p. 143). At the same time, considering the notion of social interaction as the site of identity construction, I required a method that would allow participants to be comfortable and free to construct their narrative. I thus chose semi-structured interviews. Dörnyei (2007) described interviews as a known "communication routine" (p. 134) thus allowing participants to anticipate the format. Also, Mann (2011) viewed interviews as "sites of social interaction, where ideas, facts, views, details and stories are collaboratively produced by interviewee and interviewer" (p. 8). This definition places a spotlight on both the interviewer and the researcher and implies that the data produced are thus specific to this pairing. Changing the interviewer would result in the production of a different data set. Although I agree with this position it is important to note that I wished to highlight the stories of the participants and so I was as quiet as possible in order that they were allowed to talk at length on what they perceived to be relevant. It was only at a complete stop in the participants' narratives that I intervened. However, it is important to recognise that other factors such as my demeanour, my clothes, my being a foreigner, and my being a gay man will all have had an impact. A different interviewer would have had a different impact on the interview and the data produced. It was made clear to the participants that they could use Spanish if necessary although the interviews were conducted in English.

Data Analysis

I began the process of data analysis by listening repeatedly to the recordings while taking notes. I analysed these for recurring themes within each participant's narrative and for stories contributing to answering my research questions. Three main themes emerged from the data: participants' language learning history, participants' reasons for becoming a language teacher, and being a gay language teacher in the Colombian context. I transcribed pertinent sections of the interviews not following the conventions of transcription for conversation analysis. I justify this method by reiterating my wish to focus on the content, not the form of the narrative thus placing the participants' voices front and centre with as little distortion as possible of what they actually said. Therefore repetitions, false starts, and syntactical errors can be seen in the transcriptions. To save space I have used ellipses to avoid presenting lengthy extracts that do not contribute directly to the theme being discussed. Precedent for this can be found in the literature (see for example Gray, 2010; Tsui, 2007).

A thematic analysis was thus conducted and this paper will present findings related to the third theme, being a gay language teacher in the Colombian context.

Findings

By far the largest of the themes that emerged from the data was that of being a gay language teacher in Colombia. I present here some extracts from the participants' narratives that illustrate how their professional and sexual identities are "mutually inflecting" (Nelson, 1999, p. 376) beginning with the issue of disclosing their sexual identity.

Coming Out in the Classroom

For most people who do not conform to the heterosexual norm, a significant issue in their lives is the revealing of this information to their family, friends, and colleagues. For the participants in this study the issue of coming out in their professional contexts and in class with students uncovered some noteworthy and conflicting points. Two of the participants, Alex and José, deal with this issue in a similar manner that could be summed up as neither advertising, nor denying their sexuality.

> I'm not the person who's going, "Oh Hi! I'm gay." . . . With some kids that immediately realise, "Hey teacher are you gay?" I have no problem to say "Yeah, I'm gay". They are like, "Really?" (Alex, Interview 2)

> I don't say hello to my class or to my colleagues and I say, "Hello, I'm gay". No, I don't do that. But but I don't deny it . . . And I guess most of them know I'm gay . . . I do my job and they respect me so, so I feel very comfortable. It was a long process. (José, Interview 1)

In 2007 the Editor's Note in a special edition of the *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education* noted that "coming out is *still* difficult, if not impossible for many teachers" (p. 2). Cultural context, educational setting, perhaps the teacher's age, and previous experiences of coming out are some of the factors that might contribute to this difficulty. The strategy described by Alex and José could be seen as a compromise and it could be argued that according to their narratives it is possible for a gay teacher in their contexts to be honest about her or his sexuality. On the other hand, the lack of complete openness does also suggest that these teachers are not totally sure about coming out to their class. However, a third interpretation of the way these teachers' deal with coming out in the classroom could argue that in fact these teachers do not view their sexuality as a great concern. It is there, part of their identity, but they do not treat it as a major concern. José hints at the fact that he did not always have this attitude and the following fragments of his narrative help to build a picture of the process he has been through to feel comfortable as a gay language teacher.

> I'm relaxed with the fact that I'm gay . . . it wasn't always that way. Years ago, I was so concerned with that. I was so uptight, I was so . . . restless . . . because I was so concerned about the fact that I was gay. (José, Interview 3)

> Right now, I feel comfortable with myself and I know who I am but during that process I thought, ah, OK, I need to be excellent because if I'm not very good at what I'm going to do then they are going to see that I am gay and they are going ah they are going to point at me and they are gonna say, "He's gay". (José, Interview 1)

> Somehow the thing of being good at something and trying to excel at things was somehow an idea that I had to kind of cover or support the fact that I was gay . . . I still had you know this little like thought in my head that that's not good, that's not good because I grew up in a Catholic family and in this society. (José, Interview 1)

José describes an explicit concern that if he was thought to be a bad teacher people would focus on his sexuality and set him apart for being gay. He is clear that he is including himself in that potential criticism when he states that striving for excellence as a teacher may have been his way of hiding his sexuality, denoted as something negative by his Catholic background. José's sexual identity and his professional identity were thus not always compatible for him and his process reflects the assertion by Norton and Toohey (2011) that not only are the various facets of identity often in conflict but they are also subject to evolution over time as José's narrative demonstrates.

Carlos, on the other hand, describes a very different evolution in his attitude to revealing his sexuality to

his colleagues and students. He feels that it has always been evident that he is gay and early in his career this didn't appear to be an issue.

> My students, eh, I, the ones I went out with when I was younger than them, they knew I was gay, and they knew my boyfriend . . . once a month we would have parties together. (Carlos, Interview 2)

There was thus no problem in the past for Carlos to socialise with students and take his boyfriend along. However, he explains that this situation has changed.

> You don't know what students might say. Then I don't say exactly that I'm living with a man but but I don't say I have a a girlfriend or a, or that I'm living with a woman. I, I use the Spanish *le*. It is like a neuter, a neutral term. (Carlos, Interview 1)
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> I never tell my students I'm gay . . . I mean of course they know I am . . . I always say "my partner" . . . I use indirect ways, I never say "him" because I sort of feel that eh some people in Colombia still feel that it is a bad thing. (Carlos, Interview 2)

It is obvious that a change has taken place in Carlos' attitude to revealing his sexuality. He is now much more guarded and unwilling to do this in class. This is particularly interesting considering that he is still teaching in the same institution, the institution has no religious affiliation and he has, over the years, held positions of seniority at that institution, suggesting that he might feel at ease in that environment. Carlos' attitude is however challenged when he describes an occasion when one of his students was open about being gay in class.

> She's a student and she says about her girlfriend and stuff eh in front of the other people. I haven't been able and I, I don't think I would be able to make that conversation, or to to make it a class conversation topic. But it was very interesting that although she said that people did not react. (Carlos, Interview 2)

Carlos makes it clear here that it is possible to be openly gay in his classroom. It is not the situation that prevents him from being explicit about his sexuality; rather, it is he himself who doesn't feel able to do this.

Workplace Influence

It would seem logical to suggest that the institution where a teacher works would have a bearing on their decision to be open about their sexuality, and there is some evidence for this in the participants' narrative. I would speculate that within the largely conservative Colombian society institutions professing an explicitly Catholic orientation would be less favourable to their teachers being openly gay. The opposite of this hypothesis would suggest that the state schools that are ostensibly free from religious influence would be more welcoming of teachers who identify as gay or lesbian. In fact, my own personal experience negates this hypothesis as I have never experienced homophobia during my four years working in a private Catholic institution in Colombia, and the participants' narratives illustrate that the situation is not as clear as the hypothesis suggests. José's narrative seems to demonstrate that his place of work is crucial to his being an openly gay language teacher.

> Especially at the university where I work, which is a public university, it's a very special place, ah in terms of openness, sexual differences. Well I, here you don't feel, you don't feel that much that being gay or lesbian, or whatever you are, it's a problem. (José, Interview 1)

José later corroborates this with an anecdote from the classroom that illustrates that his students were unfazed when he revealed his sexuality.

> They asked for my opinion . . . and I openly answered in a way that they realised that I was gay . . . and they just didn't say a word . . . The issue here is not, "Am I gay or not?" The issue here is, "Am I a good teacher or not?" (José, Interview 2)

Despite this confidence in his own case, José makes it clear that the ease with which he can be openly gay is largely because of his place of work.

> The university is a place for diversity, for discussion, and for argumentation . . . So, maybe because of the fact that I am in this specific place . . . or because of the fact that I'm gay I might have found a specialists spot for me to develop here. (José, Interview 2)

I've heard stories about people being you know, eh, rejected at jobs here in [name of city] because of being too gay, because eh people could tell. (José, Interview 2)

We have already seen that José has not always felt this freedom to be himself. He explains the role played by the institution and his colleagues in allowing him to freely reconcile the two aspects of his identity: being a gay man and a language teacher.

It helped me because there is freedom here. And I saw gay teachers working . . . of course you used to hear the comments like, "He's so gay" . . . but then I heard "Ah no, but, he speaks very well the language. He's a very good teacher." (José, Interview 1)

I learned that that [being gay] didn't affect my teaching. That somehow students were more concentrated on my level of proficiency in the languages or the activities that I brought to class. And I realised that good planning and improving my planning was even more important that thinking of trying to hide who I was. (José Interview 2)

José's experience of being a gay language teacher has thus been strongly influenced by his work environment. On the other hand, incidences of homophobia in the narratives of Carlos and Alex serve to complicate this comfortable situation presented by José.

Impact on Career Path

Carlos recounts that more than 20 years ago, when he was completing his undergraduate degree in language teaching, the actions of his cooperating teacher meant that he never taught a class in the practicum part of the course.

I think it was because I was . . . a gay man, I did a practicum, in which I did not have to study at all, ah to teach . . . I think it was because of my being gay, and being very visibly gay . . . In practice two we had to teach and then I did teach, but to the teacher . . . she asked me to teach her English, because she felt I spoke better English than she did . . . so I never really taught a group of people. (Carlos, Interview 1)

Carlos thus describes a situation where, although he was not explicitly discriminated against for being gay, he presumes that his teacher did not feel it was appropriate for a gay man to teach her class. On another occasion, early in his career, Carlos had a temporary contract in a Catholic school. His section head at that point seemed to steer him away from that school to another institution.

She told me there was a call for a vacancy at the [local institution] and that she knew the principal would not call me . . . I think it is because of my being gay . . . for a Catholic school it was not like very good and then I applied to the [local institution] and ever since I have been somehow related to the [local institution]. (Carlos, Interview 1)

In these two examples, it can be seen that other people's attitudes to Carlos' sexuality and his unsuitability for their professional setting has influenced his career. The impact of the local Catholic context can also be detected and it is not a coincidence that the local institution to which he was directed has no religious affiliation. The historical legal context is also cited by Carlos as a factor in being a gay language teacher in Colombia when he describes sitting the national exam to become a teacher in the state school system.

In Colombia, there is something called el *concurso docente* [competitive examination for teacher placement in state school system] and in 1990 just before, eh, graduation, there was one. And I applied, with several friends who were gay, and . . . none of us passed the contest . . . and then I remember also that we had some friends that were not very good in English . . . people that were not like the best students they passed the contest . . . in 1994 . . . a rule was was taken out according to which gay people could not be teachers. So, at that time of the contest maybe that's what they thought . . . but anyway we did not pass the contest. (Carlos, Interview 1)

Rather than express frustration about these events, Carlos adopts a positive perspective on these influences on his career that he understands result from other people's attitude to his sexuality.

I think that Secretary of Education people may have been following the law . . . but I think in general the people who have eh eh done things for my being gay have been doing it, somehow I've been kind of defended by them . . . on the one hand she actually, she did something that affected my life enormously . . . so she was kind of defending me but she understood or she knew that I would not be for that school, because, I think because of my being gay . . . but that she still had to help me somehow because she saw potential. (Carlos Interview 1)

It is also Carlos who has experienced explicit homophobia in his professional setting.

Once, a mother . . . complained that that I was too faggoty to, for, for, for teaching her children . . . My bosses . . . they actually said to the woman that that she shouldn't think of that but rather that I was a very good teacher. (Carlos, Interview 2)

What is interesting about Carlos' narrative is that these events, which could easily be framed as homophobic, took place at the beginning of his career when he was relaxed about revealing his sexuality to his students and colleagues. Paradoxically, he does not recount any recent instances of discomfort with his position as a gay language teacher and yet he is now unwilling to be clear about his sexuality in the classroom.

Homophobia in a Public School

In contrast, when I asked Alex, who works in a state school, if he had experienced homophobia he was quick to reply, "Absolutely".

The Principal I have . . . she's completely . . . homophobic. She's always doing these kind of jokes which are not really nice in in the meetings. She's talking about the kids who are really girly in a not really nice way. At the, at the beginning I said ok, I'm going to be quiet . . . but then when the things were like ok, I'm saying this but, and I'm going to make you understand that it's to you, yeah, she's not being direct but a little bit sarcastic in my presence . . . I started being like in the same game. (Alex, Interview 2)

She said, "Ha, look the only thing that these kind of '*locas*'[1] [gay] can do is just go and dance or maybe go and and cut mm and cut some people hair, or going to a salon." And I remember I just turned to look at her and I say, "Really, so that's what you think. So, you shouldn't go to a salon if you going to mistreat these people like that because they are those who are trying to make you feel comfortable with the ugly thing that maybe you have. Don't you think so?" (Alex, Interview 2)

Alex is evidently on the receiving end of homophobic comments from his head teacher who does not seem to be at ease with Alex's identity as a gay language teacher in her school. He also describes how students can be on the receiving end of discrimination.

It was like they decided to put all the possible gay people in my classroom, yeah, so for me it was all right, but then there was this comment, "Ah ok, it's just that you know we decided that it was better for you to be with people like you in the classroom." . . . Two or three kids heard that and they, they say, "Teacher, why they are saying that we are in the gay group?" yeah, so I remember that I said that I need a meeting with you, with the Principal . . . and I said I need you to respect me . . . if we are going to create a kind of segregation here just let me know and I'm going to start looking for some help in the Education eh Minister or something like that because I don't think in a public school this is going to be all right. And also, respect these kids, they are trying to understand who they are. (Alex, Interview 2)

Alex is clearly not afraid to stand up to his head teacher, a security that comes from the fact that he has passed the *concurso docente*, the national exam for teachers who wish to work in the state system. He is protected by his status as a government employee. A further point of interest comes from Alex's description of his time in a previous job, in a private Catholic high school where it seems that being gay was not a problem for his employers.

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1   *Loca* is a derogatory term in Spanish for a gay man who is very effeminate.

I felt so free to be to some extent mm myself . . . I was not scared to say, to say I agree or disagree with this or that, in fact I think I loved that school because they were not talking about other different conditions in a very hard and punish way. (Alex, Interview 3)

It might be expected that homophobia would be more evident in the context of a private Catholic institution, but Alex's narrative refutes that expectation.

Conclusions

The most obvious, and perhaps unsurprising, conclusion that can be drawn from the data presented is that the day-to-day experience of queer identifying EFL teachers in Colombia is complex and varied. The participants did not describe one coherent attitude towards revealing their sexual identity in their professional milieu nor did they describe consistently their experiences of being gay language teachers. All three narratives do however show that queer identity and language teacher identity can coexist easily in the Colombian context. Alex and José are comfortable simultaneously living these two aspects of their identity. Carlos, although he does not feel able to be so explicit, is also comfortable and supposes that despite his reticence his colleagues and students are aware that he is gay. I would speculate that the age difference between Carlos and the other participants may account for this difference. It can thus be concluded that these two identities are compatible in these three EFL teachers.

In addition, all three participants place importance on their immediate professional context. However, it is not possible to draw general conclusions about these institutions as while Alex was welcomed into a private Catholic institution Carlos felt that he had been directed away from that particular context. Whereas José feels that a public university has been instrumental in his journey to becoming comfortable being a gay language teacher, Alex has encountered explicit homophobia within his public secondary school. This reality points to the probability that it is individuals within institutions that play the greater role rather than the general ethos of an institution itself. In fact, some of the extracts presented clearly demonstrate other peoples' discomfort with the participants' sexual identities.

The project was well designed for the in-depth study of my three participants. However, the personal nature of narrative research implies that the findings are highly specific to the teachers interviewed and their professional contexts. The findings are not easily generalizable. In order to broaden the knowledge created by this project it would be pertinent to carry out the project with teachers with a different profile. Most urgently it would be important to add the voices of female teachers who identify as queer to the data. Following Donahue's (2007) assertion that "learning to teach is about . . . negotiating identities, finding out who one is in the classroom" (p. 75), it would be interesting to carry out a longitudinal study following queer identifying student teachers as they study for their undergraduate degree to gather data on queer language teacher identity formation.

Concerning the influence of a teacher's workplace, one limitation of the research is that all three of these teachers work in urban settings and it is important to note the role of setting upon the acceptance of diversity. I would speculate that gay language teachers in rural settings in Colombia would tell very different stories.

The implications for the EFL classroom echo Kupfer (2000) and Kanno and Stuart (2011). All teachers, including those identifying as queer, bring all aspects of their identity into the classroom and being comfortable with these aspects, not having to hide a fundamental part of themselves, directly contributes to classroom dynamics and thus the learning process. Teachers who openly identify as queer not only provide queer students with a role model but they also demonstrate the importance of honesty in the classroom.

In a small way, the scarce research on queer identifying language teachers has been added to by this project. Perhaps the knowledge created in this project might provoke more research on the topic and thus increase

understanding of queer language teacher identity issues in Colombia and how these impact upon local teaching and learning processes.

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