Queering the English Classroom: could Year 9 students' learning about Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* be enriched by studying its LGBTQIA+ themes?

Matt Simpson

(PGCE Secondary English, 2019-2020)

email: matt.simpson@btinternet.com

Abstract

Heteronormativity is commonplace in schools, highlighted by the 2019 protests concerning LGBTQIA+ education at Parkfield Community School in Birmingham and the prevailing pathologizing narratives disseminated by LGBTQIA+ charities. This study explores how heteronormativity could be challenged in the English classroom and whether this process could improve indicators of attainment in the subject of English as well as pupils' knowledge of LGBTQIA+ topics and issues. The investigation was undertaken with Year 9 students from a state-maintained, non-selective, all girls secondary school. Findings suggest that English as a subject, particularly the works of Shakespeare, offer an excellent opportunity to challenge heteronormativity in the classroom.

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Introduction

> "People are constantly encouraged to believe that heterosexual desire, dating, marriage, reproduction, childrearing, and homelife are not only valuable to themselves, but the bedrock on which every other value in the world rests. Heterosexual desire and romance are thought to be the very core of humanity."
>
> (Warner, 2000, p.47)

Twenty years on from the publication of Michael Warner's seminal *The trouble with normal* and, in the realm of education at least, not much has changed. In 1988 the government legislated Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, which forbade any state-maintained school from presenting homosexuality as an acceptable family relationship. Moreover, schools could not promote or publish any material that may be considered to have the "intention of promoting homosexuality" (Local Government Act, 1988). Whilst this was repealed in 2003, its legacy of heteronormativity in schools lives on. This is perhaps best evidenced by the demonstrations in 2019 at Parkfield Community School in Birmingham, where parents protested with their children outside of the school against the Children and Social Work Act 2017 –which made teaching lessons on same-sex relationships mandatory for all schools – and the No Outsiders project – an initiative promoting LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and queer/questioning, intersex, asexual, and those who are gender/sexuality non-conforming more generally) visibility in primary schools. Even more concerningly, Andrew Moffat, the assistant headteacher at the school who helped to design and introduce the No Outsiders project into the curriculum, was subjected to homophobic abuse, gaining the nickname "Mufti Moffat" and having to endure graffiti around the school, reading "No Gays Here" (Lightfoot, 2019). When the bedrock of heterosexuality is challenged, those engaged in perpetuating this heteronormative myth fight back through any means possible in order to preserve this "core of humanity" (Warner, 2000, p.47). Indeed, the protesters at Parkfield Community School were not content with solely preserving this bedrock at their own school, with protesters quoted

saying that they wanted the No Outsiders project abolished "not just in this school but at every school in Birmingham and every school in the country" (Lightfoot, 2019). Whilst this is an extreme example, exacerbated by the dominant religious beliefs in that area of Birmingham, research conducted by LGBTQIA+ charities such as Stonewall – which I will explicate in more detail later – supports the conclusion that the Parkfield Community School protests are symptomatic of a wider issue of heteronormativity within schools (Stonewall, 2017). After attending a 'Queering the Art Classroom' workshop run by Tabitha Millett as part of my PGCE course and witnessing how heteronormativity could be challenged within the Art Classroom, I began to consider how this approach could be adapted for the English classroom. This paper will examine to what extent exploring the LGBTQIA+ themes of *The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare can not only challenge the prevailing heteronormativity within the British education system, but also result in an enhanced student understanding of the play. I have drawn upon approaches from action research in order to conduct this study; this method was justified because there was currently no teaching on the LGBTQIA+ themes within *The Merchant of Venice* at my PP2 school – my lessons hopefully go a small way to rectifying that.

Literature Review

The Q in LGBTQIA+

Throughout this study, I will use the acronym LGBTQIA+ as it goes further than previous iterations - LGBT, LGBTQ+ - in incorporating the full range of people who are gender and/or sexuality non-conforming. I will be focusing on the queer element of this acronym and how queerness could be incorporated into the English classroom. As the myriad of books on the subject can attest, there can be no absolute definition of queerness, but Hugh Stevens in *The Cambridge Companion to Gay and Lesbian Writing* aptly summarises where queerness differentiates from homosexuality: "The gay liberation movement of the 1970s […] was divided between those who thought gay activism should work pragmatically to achieve particular goals and those who saw homosexuality as valuable in that it radically questioned the social structure and worked against strictures of gender conformity and the privileging of the monogamous couple" (Stevens, 2010, p.82). Edmund White, the novelist and essayist, acknowledges such a division, describing it as a "central disagreement […] a question of principles as much as tactics" (White, 1980, pp.295-6). Stevens gives each side of this central

disagreement a general name – assimilationist and queer. This division persists today, with the assimilationist approach personified by the former American Presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg. Buttigieg is openly gay, but many believe his white, wealthy, assimilationist views damage the LGBTQIA+ movement, presenting a sterilised version of homosexuality ready for American mass-consumption. Resultantly, at a February 2020 private fundraiser for his campaign, queer activists disrupted proceedings, with one of the activists explaining "I'm definitely proud of the fact that a gay candidate has made it thus far, but it's hard to enjoy or appreciate when his stances are so middle of the road and speak to a predominantly white, upper class audience" (Ho, 2020). Warner sums up the two distinct approaches that those with non-conforming genders and/or sexualities can take: "Like most stigmatised groups, gays and lesbians were always tempted to believe that the way to overcome stigma was to win acceptance by the dominant culture, rather than change the self-understanding of that culture" (Warner, 2000, p.50). Buttigieg chose the first option, attempting to win over American voters by assimilating and being accepted into their culture. For this study, however, I do not want to explore LGBTQIA+ themes in a way that is acceptable to the dominant culture, but in a way that challenges the self-understanding of that culture.

In practice, the challenge of ensuring that the exploration of LGBTQIA+ themes within the classroom remains queer and not assimilationist is difficult. In *The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism* (Duggan, 2002), Lisa Duggan explains how homosexuality has been subsumed by the economic and political movement that defines our current epoch: neo-liberalism. Duggan argues that the cultural imperialism of the neo-liberal movement is often overlooked, warning that new 'mainstream' gay politics are a subset of this wider movement; here, almost two decades previously, Duggan predicts the rise of Pete Buttigieg, a politician whose politics fit comfortably under the neo-liberal umbrella. This she defines as 'The New Homonormativity': "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (ibid., p.179). Although Duggan is speaking about the situation in America, homonormativity can be witnessed in many of the LGBTQIA+ initiatives within British schools. For instance, in both of my PGCE placement schools, there were several posters around the school stating "Some People Are Gay. Get Over It!", yet there were none dedicated to other less common non-normative sexual or gender-identities. Indeed, at one of the schools, during LGBT+ (their acronym) History Month they devoted more space in a display to allies of the LGBT+ movement than those with non-

conforming gender and sexuality identities. This is not to criticise the efforts of these schools who are attempting to create an inclusive learning environment - efforts to queer the school environment can work in tandem with existing projects such as LGBT+ History month - but current initiatives tend to conform with the depoliticised gay culture that Duggan sees as a subset of neo-liberalism, attempting to assimilate rather than challenge the dominant culture. Thus, any attempts to queer the classroom must not only challenge heteronormativity, but also homonormativity. It should be noted that both Warner and Duggan's conclusions are primarily theoretically based and not related specifically to education; they have, therefore, been adapted for the purpose of this investigation.

Queering the Classroom

There have been a variety of attempts to challenge heteronormativity in British secondary schools, perhaps the most prominent being the work carried out by the charity Stonewall. As previously mentioned, Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 was only repealed 17 years ago and, as Greenland and Nunney (2008) illustrate in their article, its effects linger beyond 2003. Through questionnaire data from 39 secondary school teachers in Wales, their results show that, even 5 years after the repeal, almost half of all their respondents were unaware that it had been repealed. Arguably more worryingly, a smaller proportion reported that Section 28 still affected their schools' practice, even in schools who were aware of the repeal (Greenland & Nunney, 2008). Whilst their sample size is small and with a limited geographical range, their findings are supported by the cultural anthropologist Gayle Rubin in her influential chapter 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality'. When reviewing legislation, articles and first-hand accounts, Rubin notes that:

> "periods such as the 1880s in England, and the 1950s in the United States, recodify the relations of sexuality. The struggles that were fought leave a residue in the form of laws, social practices, and ideologies which then affect the way in which sexuality is experienced long after the immediate conflicts have faded"
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> (Rubin, 1992, p.148)

If we see the period of 1988-2003 as another era which attempted to recodify the relations of sexuality, then it is perhaps no surprise that the Local Government Act 1988's legacy of heteronormativity can still be felt by teachers 5 years after its repeal. Moreover, the most recent School Report – a study into the experiences of over 3,700 lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual (LGBT) pupils across Britain - conducted by Stonewall, suggests that pupils are still feeling its effects in the form of homophobia and transphobia 14 years afterwards. The 2017 School Report

does acknowledge that, since the last report, there has been a reduction of almost a third in the proportion of gay, lesbian, and bisexual pupils reporting homophobic and biphobic abuse, yet the overall diagnosis is still damning:

> "Nearly half of LGBT young people are still bullied for being LGBT at school, and only one in five have learnt about safe sex in relation to same-sex relationships at school […] For trans pupils in particular, the findings are alarming: nearly two in three trans pupils are bullied for being LGBT at school, one in ten have received death threats, and more than two in five have tried to take their own lives."
>
> (Stonewall, 2017, p.4)

In comparison to the scale of other research, Stonewall's School Report 2017 is the largest and most robust study into LGBTQIA+ issues in British secondary schools to my knowledge. This very size could be problematic, though, as it could result in the pathologizing of LGBTQIA+ pupils. Marston explicates this danger of pathologizing LGBTQIA+ young people, drawing on evidence from her experiences with the charity Educational Action Challenging Homophobia (EACH) to support existing research, arguing that the focus by major UK LGBTQIA+ charities, such as Stonewall, on bullying and suicide rates is, while admirable, further reinforcing the idea that these identities are psychologically abnormal (Marston, 2015). The scale of Stonewall's School Project is undoubtedly important for highlighting the current issues facing the LGBTQIA+ community within schools, yet, its very size and prominence may only exacerbate the pathologizing of LGBTQIA+ pupils. Marston, drawing on Ellis' research into 'Sexualities and schooling in England after section 28' (Ellis, 2007), also warns against essentialist narratives that are often perpetuated within British secondary schools, whereby "the complexity and history of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans lives and relationships are reduced "almost to caricature"" (ibid., p.165), often in a single lesson. This could result in the variety of LGBTQIA+ lives being presented in a reductive manner, disseminating homonormativity. Avoiding any essentialist or pathologizing narratives was at the forefront of my mind when planning my lessons on the LGBTQIA+ themes in *The Merchant of Venice*.

Though Marston outlines the pitfalls of many whole-school initiatives, she does not offer guidance on how to incorporate LGBTQIA+ teaching into the classroom. For this, we need to turn to teaching practitioners such as Tabitha Millett, whose research encourages an approach to art that shuns both hetero and homonormativity, anthropocentrism, and perfectionism, focusing instead on the materials and processes, thus queering the study of art (Millett, 2019). Millett may be discussing the subject of Art, not English, but I hope to have transplanted several of the principles – and one of

the activities - of 'Queering the Art Classroom' into my own lessons. For instance, Millett, like Marston, warns against tokenism as a form of essentialism: "there is a dilemma that presenting artwork that has LGBTQIA+ identities depicted in the content as examples could lead to tokenism and essentialism" (ibid., p.813). Millett had the opportunity through this project to develop a full queer curriculum whereas I only had a few lessons, making it more difficult to avoid tokenism because of the limited time available. I endeavoured, however, not to present the relationship between the characters Antonio and Bassanio as a 'typical' homosexual relationship, instead I attempted to "open spaces for new becomings that do not fit a pre-existing framework" (ibid., p.810) through the exploration of non-conformist sexuality in *The Merchant of Venice*.

A further example of teachers implementing small-scale research into how to challenge hetero and homonormativity within their own classrooms can be found in the No Outsiders project that inspired so much outrage from the parents at Parkfield Community School. The project is run by a collective of teachers, meaning at times their views towards challenging normativity within the classroom can differ, but their project is united under the common aim of creating "an alternative to the discourse of victimisation and tolerance underlying traditional UK-based anti-homophobia efforts" (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009, p.2). All the teachers included in the project are primary school teachers who, therefore, often have greater control over the whole curriculum across all subjects for a whole year group. As with Millett, this gives them greater potential to implement a queer curriculum, integrating LGBTQIA+ teaching across a wide range of mediums and on a longer timescale: any future research into queering the English classroom would benefit from a similar timescale and greater variety in teaching methods and mediums. Interestingly, DePalma and Atkinson do raise the notion that English as a subject may be particularly well-suited for challenging assumptions around LGBTQIA+ in schools: "Can literature and the creative and performing arts be particularly powerful in drawing upon the imagination to help broaden understandings and shift attitudes?" (ibid., p.ix)

Queering the English Classroom: Queer Shakespeare

A pathway towards queering the English classroom specifically can be drawn from current approaches to teaching Shakespeare. I will explicate the choice of text – *The Merchant of Venice* – in a later section; upon selecting the text, an approach to teaching Shakespeare to a KS3 class had to be established that would complement the queer philosophy behind the teaching methods. Coles, in

her 2009 observational research study on a Year 9 class studying Macbeth, notes the difficulties of teaching Shakespeare at KS3. In her interviews with pupils at the end of the sequence of lessons she observed, "none could put forward a convincing argument for the inclusion of Shakespeare in the National Curriculum, and indeed most were quite thrown by the very question" (Coles, 2009, p.36). It is worth bearing in mind that Coles is observing a sequence of lessons that are geared towards preparing pupils for the KS3 SATs Shakespeare paper. Whilst these tests no longer exist, in my experience Coles' observations on KS3 Shakespeare teaching are still valid as KS3 curriculums, especially in Year 9, are now geared towards preparing pupils for the mandatory Shakespeare component of the GCSE which, similarly, operates on an extract to whole basis. Consequently, the teaching that Coles laments – "Shakespeare was reproduced as photocopied extract and worksheet" (ibid., p.46) – whilst acknowledging that it is somewhat necessary, persists.

In my role as trainee teacher, I was not under the same pressure to deliver examination results as fully qualified teachers. This, combined with the fact that my placement school were aware and supportive of this research project, arguably allowed me more freedom in how I approached the teaching of Shakespeare at KS3. As such, I could adhere to the active approaches extolled by Tracy Irish, then Education Programme Director at the RSC, who uses the example of a teacher's work with a Year 10 class to encourage teachers to take risks with teaching Shakespeare (Irish, 2011). Notably, there are similarities between Irish's approach to teaching Shakespeare – she, like Coles, is not content with the current "reactionary, monological experience of Shakespeare" (ibid., p.7) in English classrooms – and Millett's pedagogy behind queering the Art classroom. Both are fighting against pupils' classroom experience being dominated by a single monological voice, whether that be Shakespeare or LGBTQIA+ charities, and are striving to create a classroom environment where pupils can explore their ideas and, resultantly, find their voices. It is for this reason that Irish's active approaches to teaching Shakespeare appear to be well suited to this study's aim of queering the English classroom.

Reflections

To conclude, to my knowledge there may be little to no research exploring queerness in the English classroom in British secondary schools, yet through examining the pedagogies behind both Millett's and Irish's approaches, a framework for this research project can be understood. Both may be small-scale, focusing on one class of 30 each, but it could be argued - with the support of Marston,

DePalma, and Atkinson – that large scale initiatives aimed at combatting heteronormativity can lead unknowingly to homonormativity. This would suggest that any attempts to introduce queerness into the classroom may benefit, at least initially, from a small-scale approach as demonstrated in the current study.

Context

The Class

For this investigation, I selected a high-attaining Year 9 class. The class contained 30 pupils, although four were absent for the sequence of lessons. The school was a state-maintained, non-selective, all girls secondary school with a co-educational sixth form. I had been team-teaching the play to the class with another teacher. Having taught them numerous times previously, I had a good understanding of which pupils were confident at comprehending and analysing Shakespearean language and which would need further scaffolding; this was beneficial for the planning of the teaching sequence. It is worth noting for this investigation that this school's support for its LGBTQIA+ community was very visible. At the time of this investigation, I had been a trainee teacher at the school for two months; in this time, I had observed a full corridor display and an assembly for LGBT+ history month, as well as posters around the school advertising the LGBT+ student group. According to The School Report, this level of support for LGBTQIA+ pupils is atypical: two out of five LGBT pupils are never taught anything about LGBT issues at school and only one in three LGBT pupils (35 per cent) say that their school has an LGBT group for pupils (Stonewall, 2017). Future research is needed into the effects of studying LGBTQIA+ themes in schools that have a less developed LGBTQIA+ support network and co-educational environments.

This class was selected because of the text they were studying – *The Merchant of Venice*. There is not space in this essay to explore the ambiguities of the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio – Shakespearean scholars can still not agree on whether their relationship is homosexual or homosocial – but the text offered the best opportunity to explore LGBTQIA+ themes within the classroom when reviewed against the other schemes of work scheduled for the term. Another key factor in my decision was the department's use of Michael Radford's film version of the play to support pupils' comprehension. Radford's version could be seen to support the view that Antonio and Bassanio's relationship transcends the homosocial into something more overtly sexual, with

one notable kiss scene. Indeed, Patricia comments in his work on queerness in film adaptations of Shakespeare that "the movie also seems to be demonstrably aware of the insights of gay and lesbian and queer scholarship that their practitioners have contributed to the study of Shakespearean drama" (Patricia, 2017, p.139). Consequently, before my sequence of lessons pupil would have seen a version of the play that explicitly addressed the underlying LGBTQIA+ themes within the play and they may, therefore, be more convinced by this reading of the play than a class who had only studied the text. Despite this, because of my desire to avoid a reactionary, monological experience of Shakespeare, I ensured that the methodology of my lessons would acknowledge and allow room for pupils to discuss the interpretative tension in the relationship of Antonio and Bassanio.

The Teaching Sequence

The teaching sequence consisted of two 55-minute lessons over the course of one Wednesday. The proximity of these lessons was beneficial for my study; pupils were encouraged at the beginning of the first lesson to begin to consider how we can challenge normative and stereotypical interpretations of gender and sexuality and, as a result of the lessons occurring successively, could more easily maintain this mindset for the second lesson without having to be reminded. I fostered this mindset by adapting a task devised by Tabitha Millett for her project 'Queering the Art Classroom': after asking pupils to bring in a collection of everyday objects, they are then asked to "think through breaking and puncturing these heteronormative associations using their art practice by experimenting with materials and processes in any material of their choosing" (Millett, 2019, p.814). After providing a handout with the key terms of heteronormativity and non-normative gender and sexualities, I invited pupils to consider a selection of objects that I had brought in that were in some way related to *The Merchant of Venice* (i.e. money, a wedding ring) and asked pupils to discuss in pairs the stereotypical assumptions about gender and sexuality usually associated with these objects and also examples of when these assumptions have been challenged in the play or in contemporary society. For the remainder of the first lesson, I chose to explore the interpretive tension in Antonio and Bassanio's relationship. To begin with, I gave pupils a brief overview of the concept of the homosocial and then I handed out three extracts from the play that developed the relationship between the two men. The decision to break the play up in this manner was based on Irish's advice on how to explore Shakespeare with pupils: "they would only need to focus on one section of the play at any one time, thereby reducing any anxiety of tackling the whole text […] it would be their own working document to annotate with their ideas, responses, questions and in

planning activities" (Irish, 2011, p.12). Like Irish, I was eager for pupils to view the play as a playscript and so providing these small sections of the text for them to annotate however they pleased helped foster this mentality. Then, I asked pupils to imagine they were the director of these three scenes, asking them to decide how they would stage the scene: where would it be set? Are there any props? How would the characters interact with one another? We then watched the Radford adaptation to consider how he had directed these scenes and if pupils agreed with his directorial decisions.

In the second lesson, attention was turned to Shakespeare's poetry, Sonnet 20, with its more explicit representation of homosexual desire. The poem was read aloud as a class and pupils were then asked to create a casting call for the subject of the speaker's desire. I deliberately did not mention that the consensus is that the subject of this sonnet is a male, hoping pupils would discern this gender fluidity themselves. This led into a class discussion on the key features of the subject and how this might challenge heteronormative expectations. For the final task, pupils synthesised the skills used in the first task on objects and the penultimate task, identifying the features of Shakespeare's subject in Sonnet 20, by writing a poem derived by the 'Furniture Game' – where pupils describe characters in terms of different objects - from Antonio to Bassanio, or vice versa. The 'Furniture Game' was used to provide structure and scaffolding for pupils' creative responses, but also to encourage them to continue thinking about how objects can be metaphors for heteronormativity. Pupils were given freedom over the structure and form of their poems; for further scaffolding, I modelled a mesostic poem and several pupils followed this form.

Research Questions

Based on the literature surrounding the concept of queering the classroom, there are two discernible strands of LGBTQIA+ learning - curricular and extra-curricular. Accordingly, my Research Questions reflect this.

Research Question 1 (Primary Focus): Does studying the LGBTQIA+ themes within *The Merchant of Venice* have the potential to improve indicators of English Literature attainment?

Research Question 2 (Secondary Focus): Does studying the LGBTQIA+ themes within *The Merchant of Venice* improve pupils' knowledge of LGBTQIA+ topics and issues?

This research was, primarily, focused on the first Research Question because it relates to whether the subject of English, specifically, can be queered. The findings related to the second question gave an insight into whether incorporating LGBTQIA+ themes into lessons more generally could result in an overall improvement in the students' understanding of LGBTQIA+ topics and issues.

Ethical Issues

Before beginning this research, I completed the Faculty of Education's Ethics Form. Resultantly, any ethical issues potentially arising from this research were identified and appropriate responses were decided upon. Permission for my research was granted by all relevant parties: the professional tutor at the school, the class' teacher, and the pupils themselves who were informed each lesson about the nature and methodology of the research in addition to where the research would be presented. Additionally, pupils were told that they could withdraw from the research at any point, which was reiterated at beginning of each lesson.

Care had to be taken because of the subject matter, as BERA warns "sensitive ethical issues arise when researching particular communities which are marginalised because of their age, culture, race, gender, sexuality, socio-economic standing or religion" (BERA, 2011, p.6). To ensure that this research was conducted sensitively– although it may have provided interesting contextual information - pupils were not asked to state whether they themselves identified as LGBTQIA+.

Methodology

Action Research

An action research approach was used for this research because this investigation was centred on what Denscombe identifies as one of the 4 key principles of action research – change (Denscombe, 2017, p.127). Denscombe argues change is integral in action research "as a means of discovering more about phenomena" (ibid.), which was at the core of this investigation. In this instance the phenomenon is LGBTQIA+, particularly queer, themes in literature and the discovery aspect is how pupils react and interact with these themes within the classroom environment. For this subject matter, change is essential because there is so little available literature about the effects of this phenomenon within the English classroom. Regardless, as Denscombe notes, "new truths and new

theories will be unlikely to find foundation in such studies alone" (ibid., 133), so we should be cautious when extrapolating findings from this specific school environment. On the other hand, whilst the findings of this study should not be considered from the perspective of a positive research paradigm whereby the observations of this study are taken as fact and indicative of a wider truth, they can be examined through the lens of an alternate type of generalisation as identified by Simons in *Case Study Research in Practice*. Here, Simons dispels the common conception that you cannot generalise from a case study (Simons, 2009). One such potential generalisation that Simons outlines, concept generalisation, where a concept from a case study is applicable to examination in other subjects and across different year groups, lends itself to this research because the concept of 'Queering the Classroom' has already been applied to the Art classroom by Tabitha Millett and could be further applied to other subjects and year groups.

Research Question 1 (Primary Focus): Does studying the LGBTQIA+ themes within The Merchant of Venice have the potential to improve indicators of English Literature attainment?

For this Research Question, data was collected through a variety of qualitative methods: the class teacher's observation notes, student work, and interviews with selected pupils. For the interpretation of the qualitative data, the arts-based approach outlined by Marshall and Gibbons was adopted and adapted for this investigation.

> "Part of the strength of English is that you can approach a text from a myriad of different points of view, including, on some occasions, the most obvious. There is no system other than the one which you have chosen to adopt at that moment. Although this method appears problematic from a social science perspective, in that it seems idiosyncratic and subjective, nevertheless we felt it was the appropriate method for our research."
>
> (Marshall and Gibbons, 2015, p.201)

Marshall and Gibbons propose an alternative to social science based research methodology, where the analytical, close reading techniques that are usually associated with a degree in English can be used to interpret data. As with the chosen approach to teaching Shakespeare, this investigation strived to avoid a didactic experience of English; this is continued in the analysis of the qualitative data collected in relation to Research Question 1. Marshall and Gibbons' approach is explored in specific relation to lesson observations – and this was applied to the teacher's observation of this teaching sequence – but I also adapted this methodology for the analysis of student work. For the teacher's observation notes, they were asked to focus on capturing snippets of pupil interaction

which could subsequently be analysed. With regards to student work, when pupils have been asked to respond creatively to a stimulus, it then seemed counter-intuitive to reduce their answers to a content or thematic analysis. Thus, when discussing the poems written by pupils, interpretation was based upon analytical close reading. This may have rendered the conclusions drawn idiosyncratic and subjective, as so much of the study of English is, but, as Simons argues when defending qualitative case study research, subjectivity is not necessarily "something negative that we should try to erase from the research process" (Simons, 2009, p.162). Moreover, Simons goes further and argues that when we are exploring phenomena that are experienced subjectively, such as this teaching sequence, subjectivity is an inherent part of the research and, as long as it does not stray into potential bias, it can lead to insight and understanding. By embracing subjectivity in adopting Marshall and Gibbons' arts-based research approach, the findings go some way to reflecting the complex social and personal contexts of the classroom, rather than searching for an authoritative, monological conclusion. Finally, the interview (Appendix 1) was intended to be administered face to face. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, it had to be sent to pupils via e-mail. In the original research plan a semi-structured interview was specified, with some initial questions relating primarily to Research Question 2, followed by room for discussion about their creative choices in writing their poem afterwards. The pupils were, therefore, selected based on their poems which had been identified as inviting further discussion. This semi-structured format was not feasible over e-mail.

Research Question 2 (Secondary Focus): Does studying the LGBTQIA+ themes within The Merchant of Venice improve pupils' knowledge of LGBTQIA+ topics and issues?

For Research Question 2, an explanatory sequential data collection method was adopted. Pupils were given a questionnaire (Appendix 2) to complete before beginning the lesson, aiming to ascertain their prior knowledge of LGBTQIA+ issues. The primary question asked pupils to rate their own understanding on a scale of 1-10, ranging from "none" to "very knowledgeable". Pupils were then asked to return to this scale at the end of the two lessons and decide if their knowledge and understanding had improved, declined, or stayed the same. This scale was designed so that the data collected could be more easily analysed and compared across the time points. Pupils were asked to answer anonymously so they would not feel like they were being judged on their answers; this hopefully encouraged them to answer truthfully. The secondary question on the questionnaire and the subsequent interview questions were designed to help explain results from the quantitative

phase, revealing the source of their knowledge on LGBTQIA+ issues. Denscombe's *The Good Research Guide* (2017) informed the writing of both the questionnaire and the interview questions.

Results and discussion

Research Question 1 (Primary Focus): Does studying the LGBTQIA+ themes within The Merchant of Venice have the potential to improve indicators of English Literature attainment?

The first Research Question was formed through reading Coles and Irish, then identifying their difficulties in how to quantify attainment when teaching Shakespeare. Despite both of their observations taking place over a longer time period than this investigation, both Coles and Irish are careful to avoid making generalisable claims about how the different approaches to Shakespeare teaching affect the attainment of pupils in terms of formal assessment. Indeed, for this investigation to have a clearer idea of how studying LGBTQIA+ themes within *The Merchant of Venice* has the potential to improve pupils' attainment in English Literature, the study would have had to have taken place over a longer period of time, culminating in a final assessment, and results would have to be compared to pupils' predicted grades or a control class. It is for this reason that the Research Question specifies that only 'indicators' of improved attainment were considered.

So, what are indicators of English Literature attainment? The teacher who was being observed for Irish's study noted that after introducing active approaches into her classroom "students became visibly more engaged with the text and with each other" (Irish, 2011, p.15). Whilst pupil engagement is difficult to quantify, my investigation also had the benefit of having another teacher within the classroom who could observe pupils closely and note down snippets of their conversations. The teacher did note multiple instances where pupils were visibly engaged with both the text and each other. Firstly, during the starter activity, they observed one pupil's response to a notebook that was one of the items they were asked to discuss in relation to its stereotypical gender and sexuality associations. The pupil in question commented on how a notepad when associated with women has connotations of planning and organisation, yet with men it links to the great western canon and the racial, gender, and sexuality assumptions that are commonly associated with this canon. Secondly, the teacher chose to record the different responses to the director task, focusing on two pupils who disagreed whether the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio

should be presented as homosocial or homosexual. On the one hand, one pupil chose to set one of their scenes in the bedroom, with both characters sat on the bed, because "the bed symbolises sexual relations, between a man and a woman stereotypically". On the other hand, their partner disagreed, arguing: "I'm going to direct it as straight because at the time I think it wouldn't be allowed." Thirdly, in their notes the teacher commented on how it was significant that several pupils had used the same term – "androgynous" – to describe the subject of Sonnet 20. These may be three examples from a small number of pupils in a longer sequence of lessons, but each one depicts pupils being engaged with the stimuli within the lessons and with one another. Interestingly, they are specifically engaged with the stimuli and how they relate to gender or hetero-normativity and, in each example, they subsequently challenge this normativity.

In Irish's interviews with pupils, one pupil notes another potential indicator of attainment in Shakespeare learning: "we are analysing without realising it" (Irish, 2011, p.15). Irish uses this quotation to support the teacher's observation that pupils were more engaged within the lesson. Similarly, in my interviews one pupil responded to the question "Did you learn anything new about non-normative sexualities within the two lessons sequence on Antonio and Bassanio's relationship in The Merchant of Venice?" with "[…] you have to read between the lines and analyse it properly to understand the messages he is getting across". Here, the pupil linked the study of non-normative sexualities in *The Merchant of Venice* with analysing the text almost subconsciously in order to "understand the message he is getting across". As in the Irish study, this pupil interview response supports the teacher's observations that pupils were actively engaged with the text within the lesson.

Returning to Irish for another indicator, we can discern what she deems to be an indicator of English Literature attainment by what she laments as missing from the Shakespeare teaching that she observes: "While many writers write to find answers, it seems Shakespeare wrote to explore questions. Unfortunately, exploring questions is not the experience of Shakespeare that many of our students get in the classroom. Pressure to achieve the highest attainment grades often pushes teachers into providing a reactionary, monological experience of Shakespeare for their students" (ibid., p.7). Thus, Irish elucidates the tension within English Literature attainment that makes it so difficult to discern if interventions improve pupils' attainment – often, indicators of attainment in terms of grades can result in a monological experience of Shakespeare which negatively impact indicators of attainment as otherwise mentioned by Irish, i.e. pupil engagement and exploring

questions. As previously discussed, there is no evidence from this investigation to support any conclusions on LGBTQIA+ themes and their effect on attainment grades, but pupil interviews potentially support the view that this investigation allowed them to explore questions. Interviewees were asked "Was there an aspect of the lessons that you found effective for exploring non-normative sexualities?", to which one interviewee responded: "I liked the part where we thought about the stereotypes of the genders and realised that we aren't like them and that they should be taken out of society because they are influencing the way people see things." Whilst challenging gender stereotypes and considering their influence on society may not result in an improved attainment grade, they do show a pupil having the capacity to explore questions within the English classroom, potentially indicating another form of improved attainment.

Further evidence of pupils' exploring questions and engaging with the stimuli of the teaching sequence can be found in their response to the final poetry task. Reiterating earlier comments made in the methodology section, any conclusions drawn were based on the arts-based research methodology proposed by Marshall and Gibbons (2015), adapted to analyse pupil work. A chance to explore whether my interpretation was confirmed by the pupils was prevented by the inability to discuss their responses in a face to face interview because of Covid-19 related school closures. From certain responses, however, the indicators of attainment previously discussed appear present within their work. As it is clearly not possible to include all students' work within this paper, I selected the work, presented in Table 1 (next page), as examples because it was deemed most relevant to the current research. It should be noted that whilst the overall standard of work was high, as confirmed by the usual class teacher, the three examples of student work analysed in detail represent the work which most clearly engaged creatively with the earlier stimuli in the teaching sequence. Approximately 50% (10/21) of the pupils who handed in their poems used the mesostic form to structure their response, often challenging heteronormativity by associating words typically connected with femininity – "delicate", "precious" – with this male relationship. Although encouraging, these responses did not seemingly have the depth or nuance of the three responses selected for detailed analysis.

Example 1	Example 2	Example 3
The sight of your eyes brings butterflies to my stomach,	Dear Bassanio,	The closet holds adventure
A soothing lavender, emitted from your perfect frame, puts me to sleep,	my love.	For those who do believe
Waves from a calm sea remind me of your gentle heart,	I wake to not find you next to me,	The warmth and sound of fire
No gem reflects the beauty of your shining eyes,	my bed is cold and I'm sure you would agree	You give and I receive
The floor of heave, above our heads dusted with coins of ducats worth	that the sun gave a strange light	
A lifetime, mean nothing to me when you stand before my eyes,	and the morning bird song wasn't as bright.	Your safety is my freedom
With that sweet and addictive smile of yours,		As precious as the gem
O How I wish we had met in a different world,	my love,	For the bird soars the sky
where no eyes judged love,	it was a knife in my side	And no-one judges them
of two men	to have the diamond of my eye	
	gone without a goodbye,	Lost as a candle lit at noon
	it hurt me, I cannot lie.	Lost as a snowflake in the sea
		I owe to you the most of all
	my love,	For always finding me
	next, when I wake	
	I hope my heart will not ache,	H is a letter in heaven
	for I want to leave his apocalypse	And also a letter in hell
	and find my way back to you, and your lips.	And we have journeyed both together
		A story that's taught us well
	Yours forever	
	Antonio	I've fantasized from dusk till dawn
		Who'll fit my crystal shoe
		Although all my mind can think of
		Is the love I have for you.

Table 1: Example poems used for detailed analysis

In the first response (Example 1 in Table 1) to be discussed at length, the subject of the poem cannot initially be discerned, with the pupil focusing on the genderless imagery of "your perfect frame" and "your shining eyes", until the very last line where the pupil ends the poem "O how I wish we had met in a different world, / where no eyes judged love / of two men". In this response, the pupil seems to be drawing on the androgyny Shakespeare explores within Sonnet 20 yet ends the poem on a bittersweet note as the speaker of the poem is drawn back from their fantasy to realise that their non-normative sexuality cannot be fully realised in Renaissance society.

In another response (Example 2 in Table 1), the pupil mirrors the setting to the mood of the speaker: "I wake to not find you next to me, / my bed is cold and I'm sure you agree / that the sun gave a strange light / and the morning bird song wasn't bright". The "strange light" adds a sense of queerness to the scene, perhaps mirroring the queerness of the relationship at the heart of the poem.

In the final response discussed here (Example 3 in Table 1), the pupil rejects anthropocentrism altogether, drawing on their exploration of the gender stereotypes associated with commonplace objects to explore Antonio and Bassanio's relationships through wordplay on the typical associations of a "closet" in relation to homosexual relationships: "The closet holds adventure / For those who do believe". In each of these three examples, the pupils appear to be engaging with different elements of the teaching sequence and exploring questions about non-normative sexualities as Shakespeare does in both *The Merchant of Venice* and Sonnet 20. Indeed, these responses may offer an answer to DePalma and Atkinson's question – "can literature and the creative and performing arts be particularly powerful in drawing upon the imagination to help broaden understandings and shift attitudes?" (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009, p.ix) – suggesting that exploring literature with LGBTQIA+ themes can be effective at broadening understandings and shifting attitudes of pupils.

Research Question 2 (Secondary Focus): Does studying the LGBTQIA+ themes within The Merchant of Venice improve pupils' knowledge of LGBTQIA+ topics and issues?

The first result from the questionnaire to note is its support of the observation that this class was atypical in terms of their pre-existing knowledge of the communities included in LGBTQIA+ and the topics and issues surrounding these communities. The mean pre-teaching sequence response was 6.42 on a scale of 1-10, ranging from "none" to "very knowledgeable", indicating that on average pupils were fairly knowledgeable on LGBTQIA+ topics before the lesson. Furthermore, in

response to the second question on the questionnaire, every pupil in the class indicated that they had learnt about or explored LGBTQIA+ themes in school before, albeit in an extra-curricular environment – many responses mentioned the LGBT+ History month assemblies that I myself had observed in my time at the school. This supports the earlier statement that this class is atypical considering The School Report's findings (Stonewall, 2017) and this factor should be considered when interpreting the results.

Firstly, there were no decreases in pupil responses on the post-teaching sequence scale, potentially indicating that there were no adverse reactions on pupils' knowledge of the communities included in LGBTQIA+ and the topics and issues surrounding these communities. Secondly, 35% of pupils reported an increase in their responses on the post-teaching sequence scale, suggesting that they felt their knowledge of the communities included in LGBTQIA+ and the topics and issues surrounding these communities had improved over the course of the teaching sequence.

Finally, some unplanned exploratory analysis into the second question of the questionnaire raised a novel insight into pupil preferences regarding LGBTQIA+ teaching and learning within the school environment. While every pupil stated that they had learnt about LGBTQIA+ themes in school before, only 38% of pupils responded that they had learnt about or explored these themes within a lesson context. Formby, in her discussion of the differences between school staff and young people's understanding of and responses to homophobia and bullying, presents new research based on self-completion surveys, interviews and discussion groups to support her conclusion that the sectioning off of LGBTQIA+ teaching into extra-curricular learning environments such as PSHE, citizenship or sex and relationship education, limits opportunities for pupils to explore and expand their understanding of sexuality and gender across a range of subjects (Formby, 2013). As pupils had now all experienced one form of curricular LGBTQIA+ teaching and all had responded to the questionnaire saying they had previously explored these themes in an extra-curricular environment, a question was included in the interview to discern whether pupils agreed with Formby's conclusion. Interviewees were asked "Based on your experience of LGBTQIA+ education in schools, do you prefer learning about it in extra-curricular environments (assemblies, PSHE, etc.) or within lessons? Why?" Of the five interviewees, three responded saying that they preferred learning about LGBTQIA+ within lessons, one said they thought both was essential, and one preferred extra-curricular environments. Although these findings are based on only 5 pupil interviews so should be interpreted with some caution, they appear to support Formby's conclusion, with one respondent

explicitly criticising learning about LGBTQIA+ in assemblies because "I feel like nobody really takes assemblies very seriously and most people don't listen to many things said during assembly unless it pertains to them in particular." This is not to suggest that school-wide assemblies or PSHE lessons on LGBTQIA+ should be stopped; the prevalence of these extra-curricular methods at this school in question and the pupils' pre-teaching sequence questionnaire scale responses suggest that they can be an effective teaching method. Certainly, as one interviewee responded: "I don't mind it in both because I think everyone should learn about it and accept it as a normal part of life." The interview responses do suggest, however, that pupils prefer LGBTQIA+ learning within lessons. Further research is needed to explore how these two methods could be integrated to further support LGBTQIA+ education and how LGBTQIA+ learning could be incorporated into other subjects. Additional support for Formby's conclusion can be found in the pupils' poems, where they arguably show themselves to be exploring questions surrounding non-normative sexualities. This form of response would be difficult to include in certain extra-curricular settings such as assemblies which do not often enable creative responses from pupils.

Conclusions

This investigation set out to make a small contribution to the field of LGBTQIA+ and English education, exploring how the secondary English classroom could potentially be queered. The queering process involved designing and teaching a sequence of lessons specifically created to explore the LGBTQIA+ themes in *The Merchant of Venice*, aiming to create a space where pupils could explore non-normative sexualities within the classroom. Both the research behind and the method of designing a queer sequence of lessons, along with the pupil work produced, are some initial examples of how the English classroom could be queered. As with other research into queering the classroom (Millett, 2019), this investigation was small-scale and – particularly because of the atypical nature of the class – one should be cautious when generalising findings to other contexts. This is not to suggest that further research should focus on enlarging the scale of investigation; the body of existing research into LGBTQIA+ teaching in schools warns that large-scale interventions pertaining to this area can unintentionally reinforce LGBTQIA+ tokenism and pathologizing narratives. Besides, as Warner counselled against in *The trouble with normal*, the LGBTQIA+ movement has before attempted to "win acceptance by the dominant culture, rather than change the self-understanding of that culture" (Warner, 2000, p.50). Perhaps, in order to retain

its very queerness, future research into queering the English classroom should remain small-scale and individualised to suit the specific class and school dynamic. Further research could explore to what extent the concept of queering the English classroom is generalisable, informed by Simons' belief that a concept can be generalised even when specific contexts are different (Simons, 2009). This could be examined by researching the effects of queering the English classroom over a longer timescale, incorporating a wider variety of texts, and in a wider range of year groups and schools.

Several ideas from this investigation can improve my own future teaching practice. Throughout the teaching sequence, pupils were observed to be engaged with the text and one another and the work completed was of a high standard. Furthermore, as the responses to the scale on the questionnaire imply, there were no perceived adverse effects of queering the English classroom for these two lessons. This gives me confidence to continue looking for opportunities to queer the English classroom into my NQT year and beyond. Through this continued queering, I myself as a teaching practitioner can further consider which texts can similarly be queered and observe how different classes engage with LGBTQIA+ themes in the English classroom. Additionally, by exposing students to wide-ranging discussions of LGBTQIA+ issues, texts outside of the usual classroom canon, and an alternate lens to analyse curricular texts, further research can be conducted as to whether there is a productive congruence between attempts to 'queer' the English classroom and a drive in English education, from practitioners like Coles and Irish, to liberate students and teachers from the constraining and monological grip of an entirely exam-focused pedagogy. Finally, I hope that by allowing space for pupils to explore non-normative sexualities within my own classroom, I will be able cultivate a queer space where pupils can challenge hetero and homonormativity.

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Appendix 1

Interview Questions

1. Did you learn anything new about non-normative sexualities within the two lessons sequence on Antonio and Bassanio's relationship in *The Merchant of Venice*? If so, what?

2. Where does most of your knowledge on LGBTQIA+ issues come from? This could be inside or outside of school.

3. Based on your experience of LGBTQIA+ education in schools, do you prefer learning about it in extra-curricular environments (assemblies, PSHE, etc.) or within lessons? Why?

4. Was there an aspect of the lessons that you found effective for exploring non-normative sexualities? Why?

Appendix 2

Questionnaire

This questionnaire aims to find out any prior knowledge of LGBTQIA+. Please do not put your name on the questionnaire; it is confidential so that you can answer honestly.

On a scale of 1-10, where 1 is 'none' and 10 is 'very knowledgeable', how would you rate your own understanding of the communities included in LGBTQIA+ and the topics and issues surrounding these communities?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Have you ever learnt about LGBTQIA+ or explored LGBTQIA+ themes in school before? If so, please state the context this occurred in, e.g. 'assembly on…' 'History lesson on…y'.

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