

Teaching Gender Equality through Serial Drama

A Case Study of Irish Education

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Abstract

In Ireland, there is increasing and well-founded concern about how media could be negatively shaping young people's attitudes towards gender equality, especially the role of social media in propagating an anti-gender backlash among young males. If today people live 'in' rather than 'with' media, it is important to address gender issues through and in media. This article presents findings from secondary school teacher interviews and student focus groups conducted in Ireland as part of the GEMINI research project to explore the possibilities of teaching gender issues through television serial drama. Teachers report challenges like curriculum limitations, a lack of teacher training, a fear of anti-gender backlash, and poor media literacy development. Furthermore, while some media literacy education was taught, teaching of serial drama is virtually non-existent in Irish secondary schools. Overall, the student's interest in

serial drama rarely extended to Irish shows, with *Normal People*, *The Young Offenders* and *Derry Girls* being the exceptions. These three Irish serial dramas provide rich and varied material for teaching issues such as youth sexuality, gender stereotypes and queer representation to students. Finally, drawing from GEMINI's online toolkit of teaching resources, the project's "GMN Triangle" will be used as a visual paradigm to illustrate how key sequences from the series *Normal People* can be analysed by focusing on the three core teaching modes of media literacy, narrative devices, and gender issues.

Keywords: media literacy; serial drama; gender; young people; secondary school.

Introduction

From the "recuperative exercise" undertaken by feminist scholars towards the commonly denigrated soap opera to the under-representation or stereotyping of women and girls in other genres, television serial drama provides rich material for examining gender issues (Hansen et al. 2024a 12-13). Consequently, the GEMINI (Gender Equality through Media Investigation and New Training Insights) research-action project, funded by the EU CERV Programme, engages with European high school students, their teachers, and those involved in creating and developing serial drama to explore the pedagogic value in examining "the representation of gender identities in TV series and how they can contribute to gender equality" (2024). Teacher interviews and student focus groups were held in four European countries (Denmark, Italy, Romania and Ireland) as part of the GEMINI project and this article presents findings from twelve secondary (high) school teacher interviews and three student focus groups conducted in Ireland.

The research findings discussed here highlight that there are many challenges, with some contingent opportunities, to teaching gender equality through serial drama in Irish secondary schools (Hansen et al. 2024b). For instance, Ireland's second-level curriculum has limited space for gender education, while the teaching of serial drama is virtually non-existent. Despite a lack of training on these topics, the teachers interviewed, for the most part, recognised their value, particularly the need to focus more on gender equality, identity, and on-screen representation (Arnold and Fox 2025; Hans-

en et al. 2024b). However, teachers admitted being reticent to broach topics of gender and sexuality due to their perceived lack of knowledge and training, as well as a fear of backlash from students, their parents, and, sometimes, other staff members (Arnold and Fox 2025; Hansen et al. 2024b). In addition, the importance that students place on gender equality issues, including gender representation in serial drama, differed across all three focus groups, with girls awarding more value to these considerations than boys, overall.

There was significant variation in the genres and quantity of serial dramas watched across the student and teacher cohorts. Some consistencies included a general interest in watching serialised drama, as well as a preference for US and UK rather than Irish shows, with the exception of *Normal People* (2020), *The Young Offenders* (2018-ongoing) and *Derry Girls* (2018-2022). This article draws from case studies, including GEMINI's toolkit of audiovisual resources and some findings taken from the project's final reports (Hansen et al 2024a; 2024b), to illustrate how gender equality issues can be taught through serial drama in the Irish secondary school classroom. In particular, the project's GMN Triangle, which is described by Jacobsen and Hansen (2025) elsewhere in this issue as "an approach to teaching gender issues (G), media literacy (M) and narrative comprehension (N) to students" will be invoked as a visual paradigm to examine these three core themes through a key sequence in the series, *Normal People*.

The Societal and Educational Contexts

The diversification and secularisation of Irish society in recent years, which has seen the decreasing power and privilege awarded to the Catholic Church, has manifested in many ways, including in education (Bourke et. al 2020, 2). For instance, in 2015, Ireland passed the Gender Recognition Act allowing anyone over 18 to self-determine their identity without the need for legal or medical endorsement. In the same year, Ireland became the first country in the world to legalise same-sex marriage by popular plebiscite and a 2018 referendum overturned a constitutional abortion ban. In turn, 2023 saw the number of students in Ireland attending schools with a non- or multi-denominational ethos surpass those attending Catholic schools for the first time, perhaps reflecting the downward trend in the Catholic-identifying population (CSO 2023; McCárt-

haigh 2023). However, the majority of schools in the Republic of Ireland remain single-sex with a Catholic ethos, and have a compulsory uniform policy, reflecting the enduring influence of the Catholic Church and its values of conformity over the Irish education system. The Education Act (1998) states that schools should “promote the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students in consultation with their parents, having regard to the characteristic spirit of the school”. Furthermore, a school’s ethos is awarded such privilege in Ireland that it may exempt them from elements of the Equal Status Acts 2000-2018.

Second-level education in Ireland entails six years of schooling, divided into Junior and Senior Cycles, with students generally aged between 12-18 years. The Junior Cycle comprises the first three years of secondary school, while the Senior Cycle entails 16-18 year-old students working towards largely terminal exams in about seven subjects at the end of their sixth and final year. Conversely, fourth year, also known as Transition Year or TY, is a non-examination year, where students try out new subjects, develop non-academic skills, and engage in work experience before entering the Leaving Cert’s academic grind. Our focus groups were undertaken with TY students because this year has the space and time to support these kinds of engagements.

Media literacy is taught in both Junior and Senior Cycle and is predominately situated within the mainstream subject of English. This topic is also covered in the compulsory subject of Gaeilge (Irish) and in optional subjects such as Modern Languages, Business and Home Economics. Furthermore, media studies may form whole or part of a TY module, which consists of a term or a half term of classes or activities designed by a teacher or subject department (usually English), such as ‘filmmaking’, ‘scriptwriting’, or ‘animation’. In the Junior Cycle English curriculum, the focus of media studies is on how messages are communicated through media texts including film, infographics and radio. Senior Cycle English focuses on literary texts, primarily, including studying film as a text. However, serial drama is generally not taught on the curriculum beyond the very limited Leaving Cert Applied programme, undertaken by few schools across Ireland.

At Senior Cycle, depending on the texts chosen by teachers, gender issues can be taught in the core subject, English, whereby these

topics are examined through comparative modes such as ‘theme or issue’ or ‘cultural context’, for instance. This approach offers a model of teaching gender through serial drama. Concomitantly, gender and sexuality are mostly taught through Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE), a stand-alone Junior Cycle subject, or Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) modules across both cycles, including in the subject of Religious Education (RE), the focus of which being somewhat at odds with the teaching of gender. Although the SPHE curriculum has recently increased its focus on gender identities, sexualities and consent, as well as its teaching provision, SPHE is still awarded far fewer hours than mainstream examination subjects (Fox 2024a). This stifles the ambitious nature of the SPHE remit (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: The four “interconnected strands” of the Junior Cycle SPHE course (2023) and the three “cross-cutting elements”, namely, “dialogue”; “reflection & action”; and “awareness”.

Furthermore, school policies on wearing uniforms, gendered-only bathrooms, and responses to trans/queerphobic bullying are also crucial to how gender is taught. A report published on the Trans Equality Network of Ireland's website (TENI), based on research conducted at the University of Limerick, highlighted the marginalisation of transgender and gender diverse (TGD) students in Irish secondary schools, citing a lack of both discussions of gender identity and LGBTI+ supportive spaces in schools (McBride et al. 2020). This emphasises the need for Irish schools to become safer, as well as more supportive and inclusive environments for TGD students. The GEMINI project aims to contribute to this goal by developing resources for teachers and students which have been informed by the feedback received following research conducted with key stakeholders.

Methods

The GEMINI project has adopted mixed methodologies, resulting in varied outputs, which are reflective of the different stakeholders involved in both the data-gathering and dissemination phases. For instance, the methodologies comprised conducting focus groups with secondary school students; surveying a larger cohort of students; interviewing secondary school teachers and creative media producers; as well as desk research, including analysing serial drama. Methods of analysis included thematic analysis of the student focus groups and teacher interviews. For both sets of interviews, a rubric, designed by fellow GEMINI team members, was used to sort quotations under deductively coded thematic headings, representing their knowledge and interest in gender issues, media literacy, serial drama and gender representation on screen. Furthermore, intersectional feminist analysis was performed by the Irish team on serial drama texts, particularly the three Irish TV series, *Derry Girls*, *Normal People* and *The Young Offenders*. This analysis highlighted that the main ways in which power and privilege intersect with gender in the Irish context, as represented on screen, is through the issue of social class, more so than sexuality, disability, ethnicity or race.

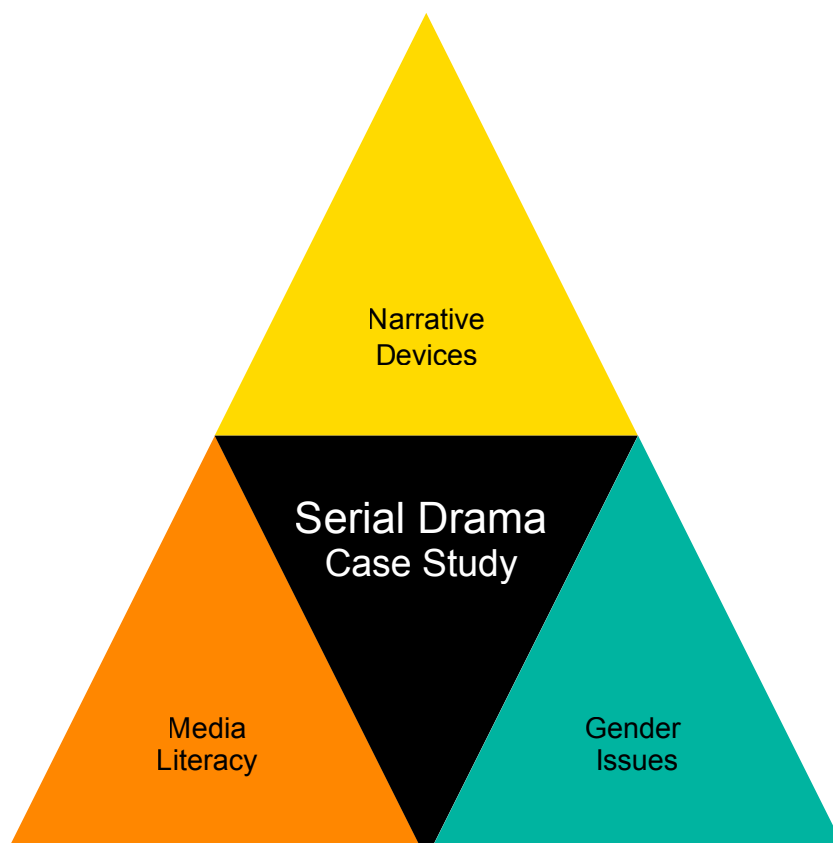


Figure 2: The GMN Triangle: GEMINI’s “case-neutral approach” for teaching gender issues through serial drama (Hansen et. al 2024a 3).

GEMINI’s GMN Triangle (above) provides teachers with a “case-neutral approach” (Hansen et. al, 2024a 3) to teaching gender issues through serial drama, as it comprises a template which can be adapted to focus on the topics of media literacy, narrative devices and gender issues relevant to any case study of their choice. Consequently, this visual paradigm is instructive, yet dynamic, as the GEMINI toolkit was developed with an awareness of the broad spectrum of gender views held by European school-goers, their varied media consumption habits, as well as the different educational and cultural contexts.

For example, the Irish series *Normal People* explores themes like coming-of-age sexuality, trauma, consent and desire, indicating a shift from more conservative representations of youth sexuality on Irish television in the past (del Río 2022, 78; Fox 2023). This makes it

an especially useful case study for teaching gender issues to Irish secondary school students. Key scenes where misunderstandings, silences and non-sequiturs add tension to the dynamics between the protagonists in *Normal People* can be compared with how non-verbal cues enable or inhibit communication, through focusing on direction and acting, as well as the use of an intimacy coordinator to choreograph the intimate scenes. Furthermore, these sequences can also be used to demonstrate how the series is consistent with a coming-of-age narrative, in terms of the sexual, intellectual and physical maturation of the two protagonists, including an awakening of their class consciousness, throughout the twelve episodes in the series.

Focus Group Findings

Three Irish focus groups, undertaken in 2023 involved 28 Transition Year students (19 girls, 10 boys) from diverse (sub)urban and rural areas. The groups included students from both disadvantaged and affluent school typologies. Despite serial drama being largely absent from the curriculum, students were avid viewers, enjoying genres including sci-fi, crime, drama and especially comedy. US TV series *Friends* (1994-2004) was a surprising favourite, given its age. The most-viewed Irish dramas included *Derry Girls*, *Young Offenders* and *Normal People*. In addition, the students' knowledge of and interest in gender issues varied but, overall, appeared quite limited. This may be due to the limited focus on these topics in Irish schools. However, social media plays a key role in informing young people of social issues:

"[I learn about gender issues] mostly on TikTok and Instagram."

"The more you interact with [online petitions about gender issues], the more you're exposed to it."

This is concerning considering recent research carried out by the Anti-Bullying Centre at Dublin City University, which shows "that boys are exposed to toxic content within twenty-three minutes of social media usage, through algorithmic recommendations, whether or not they have sought it out" (Ging et. al 2024). The dominance of social media platforms amongst young people's viewing habits

is supported by research carried out both in the UK and Ireland which shows that less than 50% of Gen Z in the UK watch traditional TV (Saunders 2024), with similar trends reported in Ireland (Slattery 2023). 15-34-year-olds in Ireland decreased their linear TV viewing by 18.4% in 2023 and now watch only 52 minutes daily compared to 2.5 hours for all adults (Slattery 2023). The UK report notes that 16-24-year-olds spend 93 minutes on platforms like TikTok, with these platforms driving interest in shows such as *Squid Game* (2021-ongoing) (Saunders 2024).

Despite the influence of social media on young people's viewing habits, the GEMINI focus group participants watched serial drama regularly and were conscious of authentic and inauthentic youth and gender representations. *Derry Girls* was praised for having a cast that, at least, looked like teenagers, compared with *Riverdale* (2017-2023), for example. Some also recognised the pedagogical function that TV drama series can play regarding social issues and were adept at identifying and critiquing gender stereotyping in dramas like *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013). The students valued non-stereotypical gender representations, pointing to shows such as *Anne With An E* (2017-2019) as a positive example of gender representation. Students also supported the notion of involving young people in the creation and production of teen dramas to ensure that the content was representative, inclusive and realistic, "especially the dialogue".

Interview Findings

Twelve teacher interviews revealed discordance between what teachers *think* students are watching compared to what they are watching:

"They're not really consuming the kind of content that we're consuming. They're more and more consuming those live broadcasts, those 5/10 minute YouTube or TikTok content" (M7¹, over 40).

While students certainly watch a lot of short-form content, as the focus group findings indicate, they also enjoy watching serial drama, albeit via streaming platforms rather than linear television. Some teachers acknowledged this and stated that they discuss

shows with their students, while other teachers were uncomfortable making recommendations to students, fearing the shows might be unsuitable. English teachers were more confident in using texts, including audio-visual ones, as a means to teach topics such as gender representation, stereotypes, inequalities and violence. Overall, though, teachers were reticent about broaching gender issues in the classroom, feeling under-resourced and under-prepared.

“My heart starts to race, because I’m not hugely confident in delivering that [gender equality] message correctly....I suppose I’m very sensitive...that I might say the wrong thing...I wouldn’t want to say anything to upset them” (F 6, over 40).

Two teachers expressed more confidence in teaching gender issues than the rest because they had a deep interest in these topics. However, this point highlights that teaching gender issues tends to be ad hoc and dependent upon individual teachers’ commitment. In addition, teachers also observed a gender divide in students’ attitudes towards gender equality and media representation, with boys often believing that gender inequality has been solved and girls more aware of ongoing gender issues.

Teachers also articulated challenges, such as the threat of a backlash to discussing these topics with their students, particularly from the boys, but also from some parents:

“We have had parents actually...saying that they’re going to take their son or daughter out of SPHE classes whenever relationships or sexuality is mentioned” (F 2, under 40).

All but one teacher cited online influencer Andrew Tate whose misogynistic and queerphobic rhetoric of the manosphere negatively impacts the attitudes of young male students (Fox 2024a; 2024b):

“Recently in [a TY] module...it’s 15 year-old boys...when Andrew Tate entered the conversation, they got very emotional, very defensive, very quickly” (F2, under 40).

Teachers were concerned that students, particularly boys, are primed to be hostile toward gender topics, which heightens teachers' anxieties about teaching these topics in the classroom.

Teachers proposed several solutions to their perceived lack of knowledge and fear of backlash when teaching gender issues. Firstly, they proposed extending gender and sexuality training, currently for SPHE teachers primarily, to all teachers and emphasised the need for clear policies on sensitive topics, particularly gender identity and sexuality (Fox 2024a). One teacher also suggested appointing an "inclusion coordinator" (F 8, under 40) at school level to oversee policy implementation. In addition, teachers are also generally positive about the prospect of the e-learning toolkit of resources developed by GEMINI researchers. What follows is a discussion of how the serial drama *Normal People* can be used to teach gender issues in the Irish secondary school classroom, particularly to TY students using the GMN Triangle.

The GMN Triangle: *Normal People*

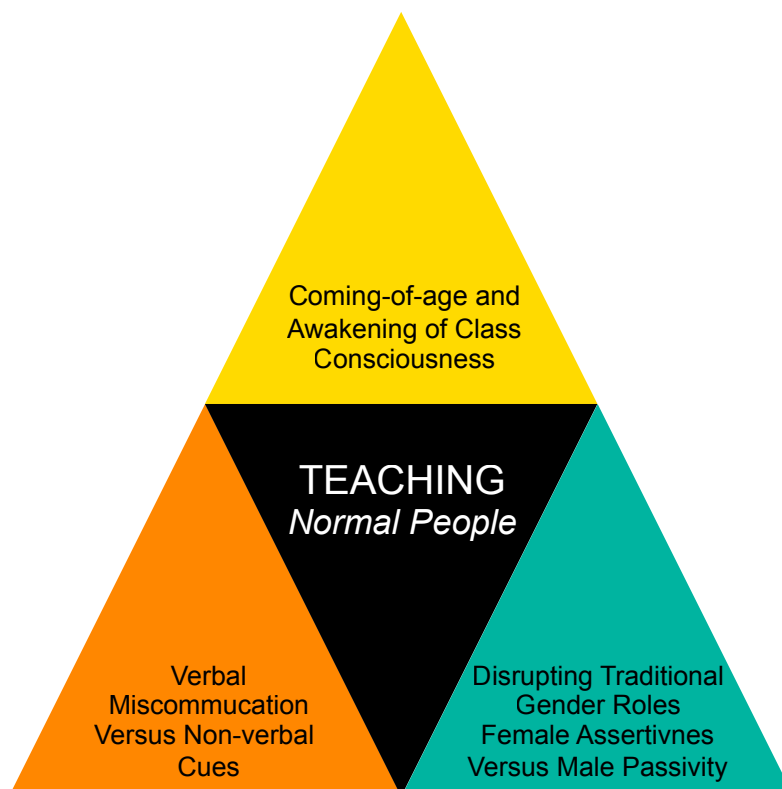


Figure 3: The GMN Triangle illustrating how to teach *Normal People* (Hansen et al. 2024a 41).



Figure 4. In this scene from *Normal People*, we see the story develop around the growing, yet fraught, romance between Marianne and Connell.

In a sequence from *Normal People's* first episode, the two protagonists, Connell and Marianne, speak to each other alone in a school corridor and share a tense exchange. In the scene, Marianne's intellectual capacity dominates over Connell's shyness and awkwardness. Connell criticises, what he perceives to be, the cruelty that Marianne expressed towards a teacher (Hansen et al. 2024a 40). Marianne retorts by inferring that Connell is having an affair with a teacher, which makes Connell uncomfortable. Although Marianne is the more powerful conversationalist, she capitulates by apologising and acknowledges that Connell has included her where others have excluded her. When Marianne states outright that she likes Connell, he struggles to respond to her candour and quickly removes himself from the conversation.

The scene illustrates Marianne's recalcitrance compared with Connell's obedience (Hansen et al. 2024a 41). Equally, although Marianne comes from privilege, and Connell's family is working class, the scene suggests Marianne's social consciousness and sense of social justice. Marianne's opposition to her teacher results in her receiving an after-school detention, whereas Connell's compliance keeps him free from punishment. The scene visually represents them as opposites, framing them individually and facing each other, giving Marianne prominent time and space within the frame, suggesting her authority. This is at odds with the typical power dy-

namics afforded young people in heteronormative serial romances whereby the male character is the assertive agent of change, and pursuer of the romance, while the female character is subject to the romantic pursuit of the male and holds a largely passive role.

The GEMINI toolkit, including the GMN triangle, is available for teachers via an online multimedia platform of resources and exercises that aim to engage young people in learning about gender issues through accessible and relatable media. Because students typically 'opt in' to viewing content like serial drama or YouTube, they are familiar with the narrative conventions of drama storytelling. Equally, teachers appreciate the ease of use of such online toolkits, which require less training and familiarisation for both teachers and students, and which can be modularised.

Conclusion

In this article, we present findings from a study of secondary school students and teachers in Ireland, conducted as part of the GEMINI project. The results indicate various challenges that teachers face in teaching gender and sexuality issues, particularly due to their lack of training on these topics. Although Irish society has made some advances in gender equality in recent years, the country nonetheless bears the weight of its hyper-conservative Catholic legacy. This legacy is nowhere more apparent than in Irish schools, a great many of which still retain a Catholic ethos and foreground the teaching of Catholic values. It is within this environment that teachers report inadequate resources and training for teaching gender topics, as well as some resistance to the inclusion of gender topics from, at times, school management, other teachers, parents and students. This was also reflected in the student focus groups conducted, with boys more resistant than girls to gender topics more generally.

This suggests that there is a pressing need in Ireland for better education on gender topics for school-goers. However, without sufficient attention to gender topics on the Irish secondary school curriculum, it can be difficult for teachers to design and develop resources to address these issues. The GEMINI toolkit offers one such possibility, and the GMN Triangle is one tool that can be easily adopted by teachers. The toolkit is designed to be adaptable to the teaching context of schools and individual teachers. It uses the

GMN Triangle and serial drama representations as a familiar gateway to discussions of gender representation and facilitates students' learning about concepts such as gender stereotypes and gender equality through relatable storytelling forms. The GEMINI toolkit, at the time of writing, is being rolled out to Irish schools, which is particularly prescient considering the worrying rise of anti-gender rhetoric and its by now well-documented impact on young boys in Ireland (Ging et al. 2024). The GEMINI toolkit is one means through which teachers can integrate gender topics at a very crucial time in students' lives and in the mainstreaming of gender equality in Irish society. The findings outlined in this article would be enhanced by future studies that explore the impact of the GEMINI toolkit on the teachers and students who have piloted it in Ireland and across Europe.

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Note

- 1 Respondents were numbered and accorded letter M for male, F for female and NB for non-binary. The naming convention is, in this first example M for male, 7 because they are the seventh of all respondents, and over 40 indicating their age group