

In Praise of Diversity: why schools should seek gay and lesbian teachers, and why it's still difficult

DAVID NIXON

ABSTRACT This article begins from imagining what it would be like to target recruitment for teachers at lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual (LGBT) people, and then examines in some detail two kinds of discrimination (or pathology) which makes life in the world of education problematic. It then turns to why, in spite of these difficulties, lesbian and gay teachers bring particular personal qualities to teaching, as well as inspiring necessary structural changes.

That's something that I had a problem with to start with because you start asking yourself whether you should be a teacher. I've never asked anybody if I should or not. But it's never covered and I've never known whether I should or not.

[Interview with Nikki, primary trainee, 2000]

I tried recently to imagine what an advert would look like aimed exclusively at recruiting gay and lesbian teachers, a pink combination of 'Your Country Needs You' and the rather clever, thought-provoking stills and clips from the Teaching Development Agency for Schools (TDA). The temptation might be to feature people like Graham Norton, Julian Clary or Martina Navratilova at the front of a class, suggesting that you too could be like them. While praising their various skills and personalities, nothing could be less helpful, in my view, either to the teaching profession as a whole or to the LGBT portion of it. Stereotypes would be reinforced, and the pursuit of sexualities equality put back. Instead, with a particular focus on recent research undertaken with my colleague Nick Givens, I hope to show in this article what strengths LGBT teachers bring to a school community, in personal and structural terms, and by extension, the benefits of gay and lesbian pupils, parents and governors to the world of education. First, however, I describe the unsympathetic context of schools for most gay and lesbian adults and children, in terms of overt discrimination and where more

nuanced examples pertain. Both are forms of the pathologising of homosexuality.

Two Sorts of Pathology

At its worst, homophobic discrimination for pupils includes direct verbal taunts ('queer', 'lezzie', 'batty boy', 'he's so gay, miss, he takes it up the arse') and physical aggression. Mark Lilley (1985, p. 20) describes his time at school as 'a terrible ordeal, one full of loneliness, anxiety and isolation', concluding with the charge that of all state institution schools are 'the most cruel enforcers of heterosexist norms'. Even in primary schools, 'gay' has become an ubiquitous term of abuse:

S. Everything's gay, well everything that is bad is gay. He's gay, she's gay, this work's gay, this game's gay, everything.

Researcher. And that's automatically something negative is it?

S. Yes, it's a negative word. It's gay or lame, they kind of run together.

[Interview with Susan, primary trainee (Nixon & Givens, 2004, p. 225)]

For student teachers, there is the possibility of homophobia in training institutions; we report on one interview with Andrew, a secondary trainee:

The years above, I know the ones you feel intimidated by, and they're the ones that have given me hassle and grief, and that's what I've found the hardest part is dealing with them, when you don't know them, but they're giving you the grief, but you still recognise them and you have to see them on a daily basis. They don't remember that they groped you the night before when they were pissed up or whatever ... That's been the hardest part, dealing with the Sports Scientists. (Nixon & Givens, 2004, p. 226)

And for both trainees and serving teachers, there lurks the dread possibility of a direct question in class: Please, sir, are you gay? Disturbingly, we also heard of attempts at entrapment of staff by pupils:

I also had two girls who I used to teach who were in the Year 11 group that I took for football and they tried to get me in a situation – and luckily I overheard when they were talking about it – that one of them would tackle me and the other one would then fall on top of me and things like that. [Interview with Laura, PE teacher, 2004]

The unchallenged assumption that heterosexuality is the norm – heterosexism – is pervasive through the education system, from the silence about homosexuality in the curriculum of schools and training institutions, to the signs of marriage like wedding rings, spouses' names, and casual references to shared social activities. Allied to a particular construction of hegemonic machismo, there is a

culture within staff room, classroom and playground which is deeply inimical to alternative, softer forms of masculinity. Teachers and heterosexual male pupils defend the 'administration, regulation and reification of sex/gender boundaries' (Mac an Ghail, 1994, p. 45). The identity of the heterosexual male is established by an interplay of misogyny and homophobia. Insults like 'poof' and 'nancy boy' seek to control not only the sexuality of boys, but the specific forms of permitted masculinity. Among negative behaviour traits which result, the academic underachievement of boys has been widely noted. Epstein remarks:

The main demand on boys from within their peer culture (but also, sometimes, from teachers), up to the sixth form at least, is to appear to do little or no work, to be heavily competitive (but at sport and heterosex, not at school work), to be rough, tough and dangerous to know. (Epstein, 1998, p. 106)

Homophobia and heterosexism are one side of a coin which constructs homosexuality as a pathology, to be met by verbal or physical aggression, or marginalised as 'other' to the 'norm' of being straight. The other side of this coin is a more subtle discrimination against LGBT people, often by those who would see themselves as equality-minded. This would include views of LGBT teachers as 'victims' within the system, as a homogenous group, or as potential representatives of their sexuality.

Interviews with student teachers (Nixon & Givens, 2004) revealed striking heterogeneity, and a refusal to adopt a single version of gay identity, even one promoted by the local gay culture. None of the individuals we spoke to would regard themselves, or would wish to be considered, as victims. Instead, they sought 'creative strategies that served to challenge the ascendancy of heterosexism and homophobia' (Mac an Ghail, 1994, p. 167). Kenny (primary trainee) reverses ordinary power relations by encouraging dialogue with those who believe he should be afraid of them – it is they who are effectively silenced:

that's what people want, they want you to be upset, they want you to walk away. 'What's your problem? If you want to talk about it rationally, we'll sit down and talk about it.' I would never have done that in my first year, and people say, 'You've got to be very careful because they'll beat you up.' And they won't, there'll be no way they'll beat me up now because the amount of friends that I have, they wouldn't do it because people would stand by me.

The public climate towards sexual diversity has shifted over the last decade, with an equalisation of the age of consent (2001), legislation against discrimination in the workplace on grounds of sexual orientation (2003), same-sex couples' adoption rights (2004) and civil partnerships (2005). In the world of education, the highly discriminatory Section 28 was removed from the statute book in 2003 and *Stand Up for Us: challenging homophobia in schools* was

jointly published by the Department for Education and Skills and the Department for Health (2004).

While these official reforms are welcomed, a more searching analysis of the practice and policy of particular schools suggests that a matrix of complex constituents constrain policy-driven approaches (Nixon & Givens, forthcoming). Other variables at play within the school community include gender, 'race', ethnicity, religion and geographical space. The kind of prevailing attitudes which we have described above militate against rapid change in equity issues, requiring that we work 'through the discomfort of each other's presence' (Fullan, 1999, p. 23).

An example of indirect discrimination is where responsibility for sexualities equality seems to be left to LGBT staff. After the incident Laura describes above, she decided that she needed to turn to school management for support. It was provided appropriately, but Laura's comment on this, that her actions 'maybe woke the school up', implies that the locus of responsibility for contesting discrimination rests, initially at any rate, with the individual rather than the institution. This is unsatisfactory because, in effect, it forces an individual teacher to 'come out' to managers in order for the seriousness of the situation to be appreciated; this is least satisfactory in a school whose climate is most likely to tolerate such discriminatory behaviour. This process is 'minoritising' in that it allows the likely majority of staff to pass off issues of prejudice as not their responsibility. On the contrary, the problem is often not about gay teachers at all, but about how the straight community constructs its heterosexuality uncritically.

Creative Potential and Professional Commitment

Given these circumstances, it is surprising that LGBT people wish to enter the teaching profession at all, but they do, offering the opportunity 'to capitalize on creative potential and professional commitment of graduate entrants to the education service' (Tickle, 2000, p. 2). The second half of this article in praise of diversity intends to show what LGBT teachers bring to schools, why they should be recruited and why they should be valued.

While the responsibility for sexualities equality must not be devolved to those most likely to experience inequality, there is some case to be made for LGBT teachers as role models and in terms of pastoral support. The importance of role models for trainee teachers on placement, who like Nikki in the quotation at the head of this article doubted her own position, is underlined later in her interview: 'At my last teaching practice there was a teacher who was openly gay, and it was just brilliant to see him in the staff-room, because he wasn't going to pretend for anybody.' Yet the drawbacks of this process are made explicit when Nikki herself amongst her peers is being pushed into this role:

I find that really strange because when they found out about me and Julie and obviously seeing the way people reacted, they felt the need

to come and talk to me about it, and they start going 'well actually, I had this relationship with that person' or 'actually, I'm a bit confused about this'; it was cool to start off with, then it got a bit annoying because I seemed to become the resident gay counsellor of our year. [Interview with Nikki, primary trainee, 2000]

When we re-interviewed our small sample who had now settled into being teachers, both Laura and Andrew spoke about pastoral support of pupils around LGBT issues. Compare the following two extracts (Nixon & Givens, forthcoming):

I know the kids use the terms 'gay', and 'poof' and all of that almost without even thinking about them, but I know that there are a few kids who have had an awful lot of grief in the classroom and in my classroom as well. And you do as much as you can to try and stop it, but you can't deal with everything, and you sort of pass various things on. But then you think at the end of the day, 'Well I can't devote all my time to this', and one child in particular who's in Year 11. I know, he used to quite happily wind the rest of the class up about this big question mark over his sexuality. He would come in one day showing pictures of his girlfriend, and then he'd come in the next day with a video with Brad Pitt on saying how gorgeous Brad Pitt was. [Andrew]

He was a very large lad and he got very interested in PE at one stage and he used to come to me and say 'Miss I've started going to the gym' and things 'cos all the boys at the moment are really thin and nobody will look at me'; he'd talk about his weekends very, very openly and what he was doing and things like that and I just allowed him to talk really and let him tell me about things. All his group of mates, all the girls who used to hang around with him used to talk about it all, the fact that they'd been out with him and things like this and I just allowed them to talk. [Laura]

Andrew's impatience with this young man's sexual uncertainty, contrasting to his own confidence, gives the impression of an unsympathetic approach, yet he has made clear elsewhere in the interview his unwillingness to be positioned by staff or pupils as 'the gay one'. Here this extends, in the classroom at least, into an unwillingness to share the meaning of this confidence for the pupil's benefit. For Laura, the risk of the encounter is all borne by her. As the 'typical PE teacher, short-hair category', 'obviously gay', we have seen her vulnerability to accusations of misconduct. Gender differences may also play a part in these contrasting encounters.

These extracts demonstrate the potential advantages and drawbacks of LGBT teachers as role models and providers of pastoral care. Such positions cannot be imposed or expected, given the increased scrutiny from pupils about

their own lives; and if they do take up such a task, they may bear a disproportionate risk. Again, the placing of responsibility back into the LGBT community itself risks the discrimination of minoritising – that the whole school fails to appreciate that these issues are everybody's responsibility.

This concept takes us to the heart of the debate about why LGBT teachers are a good thing: they force schools and other educational institutions to face reality in terms of continuing discrimination on the grounds of gender and sexuality, both within and without, and to begin the long, hard-fought process of setting up new models for thinking and behaviour. This is not simply a question of well-meaning actions by minorities of individual teachers, or even of translating national policies into local settings, but 'the desire to shift the social construction of knowledge' (Markowitz, 2005, p. 40). In other words, change has to invest our way of thinking, of how we construct knowledge, how we structure our intellectual processes; without this, other changes are but superficial tinkering.

The examples given in this article of both overt and hidden discriminatory tactics are enough to justify change for the sake of social justice; but imperatives for transformation range more widely. Postmodern and poststructuralist analysis, rooted in notions of deconstruction, has revealed in school settings (and many others) inherent and deeply entrenched power relations, which disadvantage almost all who are outside a narrow 'norm'. This process, what Walkerdine (1989) calls 'unpicking the knitting', has moved forward the debate about equalities in areas of gender, 'race' and sexualities, with the realisation that there are complex matrices of differential discrimination along various axes or routes. This is the first step in a process of re-inscription; in other words, creatively and imaginatively reconstructing the world, our way of thinking it and creating it, differently and more equitably (St Pierre, 2000).

As lesbian and gay people, we discomfort the regular hierarchies and challenge the way fragile identities have been built out of unacknowledged prejudice. We act as social critics simply because we have been perceived as different, and stand in solidarity with other marginalised groups by virtue of our own marginalised history. We advocate new paradigms for 'doing gender' and 'doing sexuality' in which more inclusive roles are conceived, less predatory ways of masculinity explored, and family stereotypes expanded. The ancient cultural tradition of same-sex affection and friendship provides a rich resource for enlarging the scope of human relationships and community.

The series of interviews we have undertaken (Nixon & Givens, 2004; Nixon & Givens, forthcoming; Givens & Nixon, 2006) suggest different reactions (resistances, if you like) to the subtle and not-so-subtle positioning that accompanies LGBT people in education. These were positive and life-enhancing reactions by young men and women about to enter or recently entered into the teaching profession – signs of qualities which encompass humanity, courage, self-criticism, and the ability to laugh at oneself.

One interviewee talked as a teacher about how he responded to hearing 'gay' repeated constantly in the school corridors, and recalled almost instantly

how it had felt to hear that word as a pupil who worried about his sexuality. His call for the whole school to take responsibility for sexualities equality in order to improve the life-chances of others is one route to honour the discrimination he and other LGBT pupils may have suffered in the past. Another student teacher saw his role less as providing support to individuals than as using his own experiences of school as inspiration to begin institutional change. On a lighter, final note, Andrew as a student visiting a local gay pub, realising perhaps that fuzzy boundaries are not always advantageous, sees himself and laughs:

We was in the pub on Tuesday, doing the karaoke, and these two new guys got up, and one of them was only one of the kids that I'd taught off my last teaching practice, and the other kid was a sixth former at my boyfriend's school. We felt so old, we really did. I'm only twenty! And there was one of my kids that I've taught, and there's one of his sixth formers there. Nightmare!

And Nikki, engaging a problematic 'coming out' process, who has decided in advance to tell the other teachers about her sexuality, reflects critically on how the process did not really go according to plan, but achieved a good result:

We had our end of year drinks and I got really drunk and just decided that enough was enough, and so sort of went from table to table and said, 'You know I'm gay, don't you?' And half of the table would go 'Yes' and the other half would go 'No, but that's fine.' Yes, and then, well it was quite embarrassing!

References

- Department for Education and Skills (DFES)/Department of Health (2004) *Stand up for us: challenging homophobia in schools*.
http://www.wiredforhealth.gov.uk/PDF/stand_up_for_us_04.pdf
- Epstein, D. (1998) Real Boys don't Work: 'underachievement', masculinity and the harassment of 'sissies', in D. Epstein, J. Elwood, V. Hey & J. Maw (Eds) *Failing Boys*, pp. 96-108. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Fullan, M. (1999) *Change Forces: the sequel*. London: Falmer.
- Givens, N. & Nixon, D. (2006) 'We Don't Need it in Our Faces.' What Hopes for Post-homophobic Schooling? Perceptions and Expectations of Student Secondary School Teachers in England. Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Conference, Warwick, September.
- Lilley, M. (1985) Gay Pupils, *Times Educational Supplement*, 5(4), p. 20.
- Mac an Ghail, M. (1994) *The Making of Men*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Markowitz, L. (2005) Unmasking Moral Dichotomies: can feminist pedagogy overcome student resistance? *Gender and Education*, 17(1), pp. 39-55.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0954025042000301294>

- Nixon, D. & Givens, N. (2004) 'Miss, You're so Gay.' Queer Stories from Student Teachers, *Sex Education*, 4(3), pp. 217-237.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1468181042000243321>
- Nixon, D. & Givens, N. (forthcoming) An Epitaph to Section 28? Telling Tales Out of School about Changes and Challenges to Discourses of Sexuality, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*.
- St Pierre, E. (2000) Poststructural Feminism in Education: an overview, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 13(5), pp. 477-515.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09518390050156422>
- Tickle, L. (2000) *Teacher Induction: the way ahead*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Walkerdine, V. (1989) *Counting Girls Out*. London: Virago.
-

DAVID NIXON is an honorary research fellow at the School of Education, Exeter University, with research interests in marginalisation and inclusion, especially around issues of sexualities equality in education. He teaches an undergraduate module entitled 'Gender, Sexuality and Power', and is a co-researcher on a national, recently funded ESRC project, 'No Outsiders', examining sexualities in primary schools. *Correspondence:* Dr David Nixon, c/o Nick Givens, School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of Exeter, Heavitree Road, Exeter EX1 2LU, United Kingdom (rev.dave@virgin.net).



A ground-breaking project helping large secondary schools across the UK develop human scale principles and practices.

To find out more about the Human Scale Schools project and how to apply for a grant go to www.hse.org.uk or contact simon.richey@gulbenkian.org.uk

Human Scale Education
because people matter



Did you know?

If you order or renew your Personal subscription to *FORUM* online, you are entitled not only to the conventional printed editions but also to immediate access to the current *online* edition (before publication of the printed edition) and all available *previous* online editions. An annual Personal subscription costs only about £26.00 (or US\$50.00 outside the UK).

To find out more please visit the journal's website at www.wwwords.co.uk/FORUM
(click on 'Subscribe here' in the left-hand column)

or go direct to www.wwwords.co.uk/subscribeFORUM.asp for the subscription order form.