Coping with Classroom Homophobia

MARCOS 'QBOY' BRITO

ABSTRACT In this article, a version of which first appeared in the February 2007 number of *Gay Times*, gay rapper Marcos Brito describes his experiences of dealing with a general climate of homophobia at his secondary school in Essex. He argues that positive affirmations of lesbian, gay and bisexual people should be promoted as part of the school curriculum.

Introduction

My memory of past events has never been very clear, but the feelings always stay with me. However, I do remember during my early school years preferring to sit and talk with the girls as we made daisychains and did handstands on the grass, rather than playing football with the other boys in my class. I expressed my creativity through acting, singing and, in particular, dancing, which was a long way from what the other boys in my class were into. This experience seems common among many gay men I've spoken to since, and I guess it propels a certain stereotype, but it was the first time I can recall being 'different' – different from what was expected of me. Things are much simpler when you're six, and boys played with boys and girls played with girls. It wasn't until I got to the age of around nine or ten that my difference rolled over into my being gay. It amazes me to this day that children that young work out almost instinctively the sexuality of others, before they've even had a chance to explore their own. I can vividly picture a boy named Simon standing on the brick wall outside our form class during break calling me 'gay' and 'queer' and then ripping me further by saying I didn't even know what the words meant.

The confinements of a heterosexist environment like school quickly highlight those who don't fit into the conformity boxes laid before them. I pretty much knew I liked boys from a young age, but I wasn't prepared to have my preference become a label for others to use against me. For most people, when you're a kid you want to fit in, you want to be part of it all, to be liked; here, I found myself being ostracized already, and my natural reaction was to withdraw. I started something that still defines me; I became the odd one out on purpose. I went against the grain and I was obstinate; I was everything they weren't. I hated what they liked. I liked what they hated. I remember in my last year of primary school having my own desk set next to my teacher, away from the other pupils who all sat in groups of four. I adorned the area with photos of

my favourite Pop group, 5 Star, and kept it in a very neat and orderly state, a trait I could put down to being Libra with Virgo rising as opposed to being gay – though some might argue it's a bit of both. My male form teacher at the time was sympathetic to a degree about how I was being treated, but probably felt that my defence mechanism of separating myself from my classmates wasn't helping me. But at the age of eleven I didn't have the insight I have now.

Life at Secondary School

Moving to secondary school upped the ante, and I was really nervous about attending school that first day. Going to a new school ten times bigger than the one you'd been nurtured in for the past four years is pretty daunting. You go from being the oldest and most respected to being the youngest, smallest and weakest over one quick six-week summer holiday period. However, my biggest fear was that my 'gay' label was going to cross over into this new, much bigger playground. I'd hoped that the sheer size of the school year group would mean I got lost among the other pupils, but sadly that wasn't to be the case.

If there was ever a social microscope that targeted the pupils likely to be victims in school, it was sport – this made it easy to separate the wheat from the chaff. Your acceptance and success in school society was determined by your interest and ability to be competitive, and, of course, to win at games. I detested PE. I still do. I'm all for ensuring that people are active and healthy, but competition makes no sense to me – it's unhealthy. It breeds the notion that we're separate and different from one another, rather than all part of a whole. PE made those who were less sport-orientated into psychological punching bags, and those successful in sport more confident and aggressive towards the 'weak'. In football, they stuck me in goal. Their thinking was that the ball need never come to me, because they knew if it did I'd ignore it, letting the opposing team score. If I'd been a bit more confident, I would have refused to do the lesson, but my PE teacher was good friends with my father, who worked at a swimming pool just opposite the school, and I feared my teacher knew I was gay and what he'd say to my father.

This constant feeling of confinement – not being able to say what I wanted or do what I wished – really got to me. Once we got to Year 9 the classmates I'd travelled with over the past three years, and who at times gave me a certain amount of acceptance, changed. We were now doing our options for our GCSEs. Suddenly I had to mix with new pupils who hadn't acclimatised to my being different and who were more unruly. I grew up in Pitsea, a small town within Basildon, Essex, which was probably not the most open-minded and liberal of places to live. In simple terms, a lot of the kids in my school were rough. My English lessons regularly consisted of the teacher going in and out of the classroom, trying to deal with one problematic pupil running about as the other sugar-fuelled lunatics re-enacted WWF wrestling matches on the floor, and pushed all the desks and chairs to the sides of the room. The girls, adorned in heavy gold jewellery, were armed with pots of Tippex, writing graffiti on

anything that came to hand about their current candidates for love. To be honest, it's amazing I learnt enough English to write this article. This sudden mix of new pupils meant that being socially ignored and called a few names escalated dramatically into being hit, spat on and stalked at any given opportunity. Each day the usual suspects confronted me and would torment me with the same questions: 'Are you gay? Are you a queer?' Apparently these had no right answer. If I said 'no', they didn't believe me and did what they wanted to. If I said nothing, this was taken as a 'yes' and they hit me anyway. Or pulled on my tie so tight I couldn't breathe properly or get the knot undone. Or stole my bag, emptying the contents all over the corridor floor, or flicked ink from their cartridge pens at me. I never had the confidence to say, 'Yes, I am gay – what's the issue?' as I thought this confirmation would just be a green light to abuse me even further.

The thing that was especially difficult for me was my relationship with the girls in my class. I found it more difficult than my relationship with the boys, as I never knew where I stood. Sometimes we were friends, hanging out with each other at breaktimes, sharing our headphones listening to *Salt-N-Pepa's Greatest Hits* on cassette Walkmans, and they often would defend or stick up for me when some people gave me hassle. But sometimes they sided with the boys and bullied me too. They'd be cold to me and stop considering me a friend. We were back to the primary school structure – boys play with boys and girls with girls, and never the two shall meet. I was breaking this ancient rule and must be punished. When this happened I was at my most isolated. I would sit on my own at lunchtimes, outside the school ground on a bench in a council estate and

eat the lunch I'd just bought at Sainsbury's. I'd avoid being in the playground at break and hide out in the library or toilets, anywhere I wasn't going to be confronted. It's not easy going to school every day with fear stored up inside of you, and it made me very quiet and insular for a while. And sooner or later, I'd be in the wrong place at the wrong time and back in a confrontational situation. Fighting back was never an option; for one, I don't like physical violence, and more often than not those who bullied me travelled in groups of three or more, so the stats were always against me.

I did find some refuge, though. A very supportive teacher tried his best – despite Section 28 which was thought then to influence what went on in school – to help me, and introduced me to a gay guy who had left the school a few years before. We became friends. But the teacher got into trouble, and I was called in to speak to the head – which was a very weird hour of him talking in circles without saying anything at all. At 15, I joined a local theatre youth group that gave me space to be free and express myself without fear. Through it I met some girls who today are still my closest friends. The fact I had both the theatre group and my friends outside school gave me enough confidence to get through each day and finish my GCSEs, but I know many others aren't always that fortunate.

What Can Be Done?

Most young people who experience homophobia don't receive support at school or outside of it, and this is reflected in horrifically high rates of suicide and substance abuse. If a racist incident occurs in schools, there are strict guidelines for teachers to follow and every incident must be reported. There's no such requirement for homophobic cases. I want to see guidelines put in place for the reporting of all homophobic incidents, and have teachers trained so they're clear about what they can do to support gay pupils. I'd like to see positive affirmations of LGBT people discussed in lessons, so pupils realise people like us exist, always have done and are of consequence. If our youth don't have any understanding of the many sexualities there are, and have no respect for them because their schools avoid talking about them, how can we expect the coming generations to be open-minded and accepting when they leave school? It's no good teaching 25-year-olds how to be politically correct in the workplace – we need to start at the beginning and stamp out homophobia in the playground.

MARCOS BRITO is a UK-based rapper, DJ, writer and presenter. He has acquired a national reputation for being an openly gay rapper who denounces the use of sexist and homophobic lyrics. He presented a Channel Four documentary about classroom homophobia, 'Coming Out To Class', as part of Channel Four's 'Gay Week' at the end of February 2007. *Correspondence*: qboy@qboy.co.uk