

The experiences of gay and lesbian teachers in  
secondary education:  
prejudice, acceptance, triumph.

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment for the degree of  
Doctorate in Education  
at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne  
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## **Abstract**

Twenty teachers who define as gay or lesbian in the North-east of England were interviewed in order to uncover their experiences, the effects which schools as institutions are having on individual teachers, and the moments when individual teachers have been able to have an effect on the institution.

The study uses semi-structured interviews in order to gain an insight into the lives and experiences of gay secondary teachers; the interviews, although not a stratified sample due to the nature of the methodology adopted, include the perspectives of newly qualified teachers, middle managers and school leaders, including a head teacher. Both positive and negative experiences and themes emerged after structured analysis of the transcripts, underlining both differences in experience and the multi-faceted nature of the school environment.

Emerging themes consider issues linked to coming out within the school context, issues of censorship, personal triumphs in addition to accounts of censorship and homophobia, consideration of teachers as role models, and thoughts on teaching and learning. Although respondents reported stories of problems when coming out, experiences of homophobia both from staff and in the classroom, and commented on issues when teaching and learning interface with homosexuality, the reality of the situation was often more complex than it first appeared.

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## **Glossary of abbreviations**

The following abbreviations are found within the body of the text and defined when met:

|               |  |
|---------------|--|
| <b>DfES</b>   | <b>Department for Education and Skills</b>                         |
| <b>ICT</b>    | <b>Information and Communications Technology</b>                   |
| <b>INSET</b>  | <b>In-service training</b>   |
| <b>ITE</b>    | <b>Initial Teacher Education</b>                                   |
| <b>LGB</b>    | <b>Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual</b>                                   |
| <b>LGBT</b>   | <b>Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender</b>                      |
| <b>MFL</b>    | <b>Modern Foreign Languages</b>                                    |
| <b>NASUWT</b> | <b>National Union of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers</b> |
| <b>NQT</b>    | <b>Newly Qualified Teacher</b>                                     |
| <b>NUT</b>    | <b>National Union of Teachers</b>                                  |
| <b>PGCE</b>   | <b>Post Graduate Certificate in Education</b>                      |
| <b>PSE</b>    | <b>Personal and Social Education</b>                               |
| <b>RAF</b>    | <b>Royal Air Force</b>   |
| <b>RE</b>     | <b>Religious Education</b>   |
| <b>SCRE</b>   | <b>Scottish Council for Research in Education</b>                  |
| <b>SENCO</b>  | <b>Special Educational Needs Coordinator</b>                       |
| <b>STD</b>    | <b>Sexually transmitted diseases</b>                               |
| <b>TES</b>    | <b>Times Educational Supplement</b>                                |

## **Glossary of specialist vocabulary**

|                        |  |
|------------------------|--|
| <b>Butch</b>           | <b>Masculine in appearance and manner.</b>   |
| <b>Camp</b>            | <b>Effeminate, usually used to describe men.</b>   |
| <b>Closeted</b>        | <b>The state of hiding one's homosexuality.</b>  |
| <b>Covering</b>        | <b>A homosexual actively seeking to hide their sexuality.</b>  |
| <b>Dyke</b>            | <b>Colloquialism for lesbian.</b>  |
| <b>Fem</b>             | <b>Lesbian who is feminine in appearance and manner.</b>   |
| <b>Gay</b>             | <b>Someone who defines themselves as being attracted to people of the same gender. Sometimes used only for men and sometimes used generically to mean gay men and lesbians.</b>  |
| <b>Gaydar</b>          | <b>The reported innate ability lesbians and gay men tend to have to recognise and detect one another; from gay and radar.</b>  |
| <b>Heteronormative</b> | <b>The description of the way in which many social institutions are seen to reinforce heterosexuality as the norm.</b>   |
| <b>Heterosexism</b>    | <b>Tendency to see the world in exclusively heterosexual terms and to dismiss or devalue homosexuality (as opposed to heteronormativity which understands heterosexuality to be statistically more common, and therefore more usual, whilst being value-neutral.</b> |
| <b>Homophobia</b>      | <b>The fear of homosexuals, or people thought to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual. This term is at the root of prejudice and discrimination based on an individual's sexual orientation.</b>   |
| <b>Lesbian</b>         | <b>Female who defines themselves as being attracted to other women.</b>  |
| <b>Out</b>             | <b>The state of having disclosed one's homosexuality to others. Coming out is the process by which this occurs, either to individuals or groups. Being outed is the process by which someone's homosexuality is made public by someone else.</b>                     |

|                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| <b>Passing</b>      | <b>A homosexual acting and dressing in such away as to be seen as heterosexual.</b>                           |
| <b>Queering</b>     | <b>Acting to challenge heteronormativity / heterosexism</b>   |
| <b>Scene</b>        | <b>The collection of gay venues within a geographical area.</b>   |
| <b>Straight</b>     | <b>Someone who defines themselves as being attracted to the opposite gender.</b>                              |
| <b>Transpersons</b> | <b>Men and women who seek to temporarily or permanently alter their gender or perception of their gender.</b> |

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction

One could be forgiven for assuming that the lives of gay<sup>1</sup> and lesbian teachers in secondary education are marked out by discrimination and unhappiness. Just a cursory glance at the national press over the past two years would paint a difficult picture for most teachers who self-define as lesbian or gay. For instance, the Times Educational Supplement (TES) has considered the issue of homosexuality from the perspective of the teacher, the pupil and the school as an institution regularly over recent times. Informing teachers about a report written for the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) entitled *Homophobia, sexual orientation and schools: a review and implications for action* (Warwick et al 2004) the TES catalogues the experiences of some gay staff. It indicates that gay and lesbian teachers are looked over for promotion and that homophobia<sup>2</sup> is rife in many schools with little being done to protect staff. It reports that incidents experienced ranged from the use of inappropriate language to serious physical violence and that all too often schools are wary about being open about homosexuality because they fear the reaction of parents or governors (Slater 2004). The TES highlights two short case studies of teachers who had experienced harassment at work: a lesbian who left her career due to abuse from

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<sup>1</sup> Someone who defines themselves as being attracted to people of the same gender; see Glossary of specialist vocabulary, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> See Glossary of specialist vocabulary, p. 10.

students and the lack of support from management, and one gay man who was unable to attend work due to stress linked to similar issues (Slater 2004).

More recently the TES conducted a small survey into the attitudes and experiences of gay and lesbian staff. According to the survey 75% of lesbian and gay teachers have experienced discrimination at work. This was a survey of only 104 self-selecting teachers, but gives an insight into the daily work lives of some staff. Many had experienced forms of verbal abuse, but nevertheless more than half of the respondents felt supported by some of their colleagues as out<sup>3</sup> gay men and lesbians (gay men and lesbians who have publicly confirmed their sexual identity). Some subversive homophobia was cited including an Information Technology (IT) supervisor looking at web records to check that the teacher was not accessing gay material, and a teacher who needed chaperoning when transporting children to after-school activities. In both instances, it is reported that heterosexual staff did not undergo similar monitoring (Bloom 2006).

The gay press has also taken note of the difficult situations in which teachers can find themselves. In January 2005, lesbian life-style magazine *Diva* featured a collection of diaries from four teachers as to the way their sexuality impacts on their daily lives in school. *The Education Diaries* includes accounts from lesbians in primary education in addition to those from secondary schools. However, the stories from all sectors of education exemplify some of the difficulties for

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<sup>3</sup> See Glossary of specialist vocabulary, p. 10.

teachers. Amy, head teacher at a church of England primary school believes that she would 'be burned on a cross if they [the parents] knew', and gives the example of one incident where a parent governor wanted Amy to be 'sacked because she was the biggest dyke<sup>4</sup> in the world' (Czyzselska 2005: 33). Anna, a PE teacher from London, talks about self-censorship. Staff at her school are unaware of her sexuality and therefore are unable to help when she is going through a personal trauma linked to the breakdown of a relationship. She is also worried about dealing with situations linked to sexuality with the students because 'you don't want to go near Section 28' (the section of the Local Government Act 1988 which stated that a local authority will not intentionally promote homosexuality or promote the teaching of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship, see chapter 4.3 for full description). She indicates that teaching is a profession apart in as far as coming out is concerned, and thinks that 'it wouldn't be like this in other professions' (Czyzselska 2005: 34).

Problems for gay and lesbian teachers still cause interest in the national press. Beyond the discussion of issues attempting to secure a link between gay men and paedophilia, especially in the primary context, issues in faith schools remain complex. Bishop Joseph Devine of the Catholic Education Commission called for all gay teachers to be banned from Scotland's Catholic schools in March 2006. He suggested that 'gay men and lesbians should not be employed or promoted

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<sup>4</sup> See Glossary of specialist vocabulary, p. 10.

within faith-based schools' (Martin 2006: 18). Such discriminatory statements were considered inflammatory by the national press, although they serve as a reminder of the positions of some people within the faith schools framework in as far as the subject of homosexuality is concerned.

Such attitudes, opinions, and accounts of negative experiences for lesbian and gay staff in schools have led to an increase in pressure on schools from activist groups such as Schools out! and Stonewall. The teaching unions have also formed focus groups to consider the rights of gay men and lesbians working in education.

Stonewall, a pressure group working towards equality for gay men and lesbians in all areas of life, believes that every child and young person has the right to learn in a safe, supportive and respectful environment, but also indicates that against this standard there is still much progress to be made in the UK. Stonewall asserts that homophobia is still widespread in schools, and that Section 28 has left a legacy of fear and confusion and that lesbians and gay men in teaching feel vulnerable and unsafe (Stonewall website, accessed April 2006).

Much of the emphasis for the work of Stonewall in education is to prevent homophobic bullying and exclusion of young people with emerging same-sex attraction. Resources and research for schools into rates and stories of bullying and violence, effects on the mental health of young people and possible

underachievement of young gay men and lesbians form much of the support given to schools by Stonewall. However, some reports are published about the experiences of individual teachers, and this, again, paints a picture of constant difficulty for gay men and lesbians in education.

One example given is that of Pete, who had already left his first school due to homophobic pressures, and for a second time finds himself in a situation of discrimination. 'To cut a very long and torturous story short, I once again found myself on the receiving end of constant abuse. Not because I am at all obviously gay - I am not - but because I dared to defend gay people and challenge homophobia on a regular basis. In RE (Religious Education) the topic comes up often. The students have clearly not experienced many teachers challenging homophobia and certainly very few male teachers' (reported on Stonewall website, accessed April 2006).

Schools Out! is an organisation which exists to provide both a formal and informal support network for all lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transpersons<sup>5</sup> (LGBT) in education. In addition it aims to research, debate and stimulate curriculum development on issues of sexuality and to campaign on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transperson issues as they affect education and those in education

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<sup>5</sup> See Glossary of specialist vocabulary, p. 10.



Among the links and resources offered to schools on their website is research carried out by the organisation (see chapter 2) which cites that two thirds of LGBT teachers and lecturers have experienced some form of harassment or discrimination because of their sexuality. Indeed, it reports that eighty three per cent of respondents say they have experienced homophobic harassment or discrimination, including offensive jokes or language, name calling, rumour spreading and abusive behaviour. These statistics, in addition to some case studies outlining bullying, stress and even attempted suicides indicate the difficult position in which gay and lesbian teachers find themselves (Schools Out! website, accessed April 2006).

To support teachers, both of the major unions, the NUT (National Union of Teachers) and the NASUWT (National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers) have focus groups and publications outlining their support for gay issues in education. They advise those experiencing discrimination (either indirect or direct) on the grounds of sexual orientation in relation to recruitment, pay, terms and conditions, training, promotions, transfers and dismissals. The existence of these focus groups supports the assumption that discrimination and harassment of gay staff exist (NUT and NASUWT websites, accessed April 2006).

The majority of press coverage has highlighted difficulties for gay and lesbian staff, examples of which have been given. However, some successes are

celebrated and publicised in the press, thus painting a more varied picture for gay staff than first impressions may suggest. Concerning recent legislation allowing same-sex couples to commit to each other in a civil partnership, the TES reported the story of a year six teacher at a Church of England primary school who 'delighted her pupils and colleagues' by announcing that they were to be one of the first couples to enter into a civil partnership. She believes passionately that 'if she is not open in front of the pupils, how can she give them help to cope with homophobic bullying?' (Bloom 2005b: 3)

In publicising the report 'teachers' careers: the impact of age, disability, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation' (Powney et al 2003), the TES does note that among all of the groups questioned, although the number of people interviewed was limited in as far as those defining as gay or lesbian was concerned, none of those interviewed believed that their careers had been harmed by their sexuality (Arkin 2004: 1). This report has direct relevance to this study (see chapter 2).

Greater visibility of gay men and lesbians is slowly changing attitudes. Many public figures including singers and film stars are disclosing their sexuality to a more tolerant public. Such improvements should affect the opinions of students and parents alike, and should feed into more tolerant attitudes within schools. The TES reported most favourably on the first gay and lesbian history month in this light. This government backed school project highlights the contribution made to history, literature and art by figures widely considered to be homosexual.

This project is aimed at challenging the heterosexism often found when considering the past; 'we should not assume history is entirely heterosexual' (Bloom 2005a :13).

There exists, therefore, a range of experiences for gay and lesbian teachers. The press often highlights individual cases of discrimination or wider issues of national concern, and on occasion also considers the successes experienced by gay and lesbian staff in schools. The daily experiences of gay and lesbian staff seem largely hidden, however. In contradiction to much of what is published in the press, personal and anecdotal evidence suggests that although some additional issues are present when working in education, many gay and lesbian staff experience support from staff and overcome classroom homophobia in a similar way to dealing with other issues as a member of staff in a secondary school.

This project looks at the daily lives of gay and lesbian secondary teachers in the North-east of England, primarily by conducting semi-structured one-to-one interviews, and seeks to outline themes that describe the influences that schools as institutions have on individual teachers, and the effect that these individuals can have on school institutions as a whole. Is the picture as negative as a cursory glance at the press would lead one to believe?

In the first instance a literature review will be conducted which places this study within the limited canon of research that exists into the experiences of gay and lesbian secondary teachers (chapter 2), and then the methodology will be outlined (chapter 3). Themes that emerged in the project will then be given (chapter 4):

- On coming out – a discussion as to how the respondents dealt with coming out either to staff or in the classroom, and the possible effects that this has on their perspectives of and opinions on gay issues
- On censorship – a report considering times when respondents felt either unable to or pressured not to disclose or discuss sexuality within the context of secondary schools
- On homophobia and discrimination – a report as to the times when respondents felt harassed or abused because of their sexuality
- On role models – a discussion as to the possible need for gay role models for young people, and the respondents' personal experiences on this level
- On personal triumphs – a discussion as to the times when interviewees felt positive about the interface between their sexuality and its expression, and the educational institution
- On teaching and learning – the positive and negative effects that the institution / teacher have on teaching and learning.

A conclusion with critical discussion is then given (chapter 5), highlighting the emerging themes and trends within the results.

## **2 Literature review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The discipline of gay and lesbian studies has seen much growth in the past decade, but remains a relatively new academic area. More recently issues surrounding gay and lesbian emancipation have been 'left behind' in search of post-structural and post-modern understanding of gay / lesbian / bisexual / queer (non-heteronormative<sup>6</sup>) identities and realities (see Jagose 1996, De Lauretis 1991 or Beemyn and Eliason 1996 for example).

Where research into attitudes and experiences of gay men and lesbians in education has taken place, it has often been concerned with the experiences of young people who find themselves in the educational system, with the aim of developing policy, support frameworks, and teaching materials to help young gay men and lesbians in school, and to stamp out homophobic bullying. Where research does focus in on the experiences of the teaching staff in schools much is contextualised in the USA, and in particular with high school students. Where work has taken place in the UK it has often concentrated on female PE teachers, as the issues here can often seem more pressing due to the working environment of PE departments. Much work on the construction of masculinity has also been published, with the underlying assumption that for masculinity to

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<sup>6</sup> See Glossary of specialist vocabulary, p. 10.

be constructed, a certain level of homophobia and misogyny is required, which has a direct influence on school environments.

This chapter will review the relevant literature in the field, beginning with the wider field of literature concerning sexualities and schooling, before outlining articles of direct relevance to the experiences of gay and lesbian teachers. This will also consider the sociological perspective of the researcher as linked to this current project. The following research is then categorised by methodology: mixed quantitative and qualitative methodologies, and those projects that are predominantly quantitative in style. This current project will be located within the limited literature which exists and will add to discussions in this area.

## **2.2 Generic literature**

### **2.2.1 The queer perspective**

#### **2.2.1.1 Mairtin Mac an Ghail**

Mac an Ghail (1994) is considered important in the area of sexuality with reference to schooling. He presents the findings of a three-year ethnographic study of a secondary school between 1990 and 1992, describing the interplay between schooling, masculinities and sexualities. He encourages the reader to move beyond 'traditional areas of concern regarding gender issues, and to view

schools as complex gendered and heterosexual arenas' (Mac an Ghail 1994:4). Much of Mac an Ghail's evidence was collected from observation, informal discussions and recorded semi-structured interviews with students and their teachers. Although the focus of the research was not into the experiences of gay and lesbian teachers per se, the text describes in detail the interplay between black students and their teachers, 'macho-boys' and their opinions on women, sex and gay men, in addition to the experiences of young gay men at school. The text therefore gives a useful background to life in secondary schools and the way in which different groups of students and teachers interact. Similarly, Kehily (2002) discusses sex education in primary and secondary school contexts within the framework of gender and masculinities. As she does so issues of sexuality (approaches within schools to heterosexuality and homosexuality) are discussed.

Mac an Ghail highlights the complex issues surrounding identities, and in particular gay identities. He seeks to go beyond 'essentialist sex / gender categories and to look at the way masculinities [and other identities] are made and remade in schools (1984: 13). In this way, he considers the way that schools as institutions interact with the individual and help shape their understanding of themselves, and their self-identity. His understanding of categories such as gay and lesbian are coloured by the complexities of context, and his work is therefore often located within the queer studies arena; categories of gay and straight are replaced by queer and / or non-heteronormative. This



researcher understands the need for refinement and consideration of identity and surrounding issues, but understands that such issues are less relevant when considering the experiences of gay and lesbian staff in schools; the participants self-identify as lesbian and gay and categorise themselves as such, rather than queer. Such discussion is not directly relevant to their experiences.

## **2.2.2 Identity politics**

### **2.2.2.1 Debbie Epstein**

Epstein (1994) is one of the seminal texts in the area of lesbian and gay issues in education. It is a collection of articles, stories and opinions from a variety of perspectives that traces the ways in which oppression caused by homophobia is constructed and how it is played out within and through the system of schooling and through education policies. Many of the articles within the collection have a contribution to make in as far as this project is concerned, although several aspects of education are covered.

'So the theory was fine' (Epstein 1994) is an edited version of a group interview between Alistair, Dave, Rachel and Teresa. Discussions held ranged from personal issues, to experiences at school as a pupil in addition to those in school as a teacher. Among narratives of experiences in the family home and stories of coming out at home, the themes of role models in school and coming out in the

classroom were discussed, issues that participants in this study highlighted at interview. This chapter in the book is narrative in nature, and does not seek to make any firm conclusions, but rather to give real life insight into some of the issues that gay men and lesbians experience through the education system.

Rodgers (1994) gives the testimony of a straight<sup>7</sup> female teacher whose daughter came out as a lesbian, and highlights issues for all teachers in as far as their treatment of lesbian and gay students is concerned. One of the lesbian students with whom Rodgers comes into contact succinctly highlights the areas of her experience which could have been changed or improved upon in order to make a difference to her life as a young lesbian student. Such issues (lack of discussion of homosexuality in class, studying plays and books with gay themes or characters, teachers' stance on homosexuality etc.) impact on any discussions concerning sexuality and schooling.

'Are you a lesbian, miss?' (Sanders and Burke, 2004) discusses ways in which teachers choose to define their sexuality at school. One of the authors is lesbian, and outlines her personal experiences at school, while the other is a straight woman, who fights a battle for justice for all within a school context. The chapter gives some interesting insights into the lives of two female teachers, and concludes with some advice as to how to deal with difficult questions about sexuality in the classroom.

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<sup>7</sup> See Glossary of specialist vocabulary, p. 10.

Epstein's collection is not designed exclusively for an academic audience, and therefore does not give full descriptions of methodology. Instead, the text gives a platform for issues to be aired, and subsequently followed up in research documents and papers. The book also deals with issues of coming out in the context of teaching unions, issues for same-sex parenting in as far as schools are concerned, the introduction of lesbian and gay issues in the curriculum, in addition to other ideas for policy development.

#### **2.2.2.2 Karen Harbeck**

Harbeck (1992) is an important collection which adds to the canon of wider literature in the area of lesbians, gay men and education. Again, this covers many areas of research including images of gay men and lesbians in text books, teaching lesbian and gay development and issues to do with HIV education. Much of the research is directly related to US high-schools.

The chapter 'Gay and lesbian educators: past history and future prospects' (Harbeck 1992) provides a legal framework in which lesbian and gay liberation has occurred in the US. It considers past cases of homophobic prejudice in as far as dismissal is concerned (identified through modern computer information retrieval techniques), and the findings then augmented by a social history as gathered from newspapers and articles. Continuing to argue within a legal

framework, Harbeck discusses current trends in employment rights and personal freedoms for lesbian and gay teachers in the US. In her book, Harbeck (1987) highlights the cases where gay and lesbian teachers found themselves in battles for equal rights. She uses legal notes in addition to semi-structured interviews to highlight the fight for emancipation, and as such underlines the difficulties experienced by gay and lesbian educators in the USA.

### **2.2.2.3 Kevin Jennings and Rita Kissen**

Jennings (1994) is a collection of testimonies of lesbian and gay teachers, and as such is similar to the book edited by Epstein (1994) as described above, in that it does not give full descriptions of methodology as the audience is not primarily academic. It does, however, show the range of experiences that this project has uncovered. The stories of 33 teachers are found in the collection, and these are useful narratives that describe some of the landscape in which this current study places itself. Stories are categorised into four sections: memories, journeys, struggles and victories. In a similar way, Kissen (1996) gives accounts from more than one hundred gay and lesbian teachers and lecturers in the USA, and describes their struggle for 'dignity in the face of homophobia'. In particular she outlines the difficulty of striving for authenticity while simultaneously needing the safety of not revealing sexual identity. She also gives survival strategies for teachers finding themselves in difficult situations. The text gives interesting insights into the difficulties encountered by lesbian and gay teachers in the US,

and is firmly rooted in a desire for emancipation; only limited exposure is given to personal triumphs. No methodology is recorded; the book is a collection of stories written to encourage dialogue and acceptance of the gay teacher.

In a similar way, Vicars (2006) gives an autoethnographic account of his experiences as a gay teacher in an international British Curriculum Secondary school. He outlines the difficulties and lack of support he encountered from the second head teacher he worked under in the school, and the support and friendship he received from some of the pupils as a gay man.

Epstein, Harbeck and Jennings and Kissen all trace oppression of gay men and lesbians in the classroom, and detail how this can be overcome, giving implications for policy. In this sense, they are all emancipatory and political in perspective. They also intimate that due to their epistemological standpoint (see chapter 3.2.3) they have a greater understanding of what homophobia and related issues actually exist in schools. Epstein and Harbeck align themselves to lesbian identity politics. As is outlined below (chapter 3) this researcher is more positivist in perspective, and is not driven by issues of discrimination, rather by a desire to uncover social reality.

### **2.2.3 Other generic studies**

#### **2.2.3.1 Travis Russ et al**

Russ et al. (2002) consider the difficulties for staff when considering coming out to 18 year olds in the context of first year university programmes in the USA. Although this research took place in a different phase and continent to this project, qualitative interviews were carried out asking in depth questions concerning student perceptions of gay and lesbian lecturers.

The initial research was quantitative in nature. One hundred and fifty-four undergraduate students enrolled in eight separate introductory communication classes. The same lecturer delivered all eight sessions and he was instructed to deliver teaching in a natural and consistent style. In four of the classes the lecturer referred to his opposite sex partner three times, and in four of the lectures he referred to his same sex partner three times. Evaluation forms were then collected and the data analysed. This analysis concluded that students of a gay teacher perceive the teacher as significantly less credible than a straight teacher. It also concluded that students of a gay teacher feel they learn considerably less than with a straight teacher.

A supplementary qualitative analysis was then undertaken, using open questions and some interviews. Questions such as 'if one of your teachers told you he /

she were gay, how would you respond and why?' were used. This article concludes that it remains a 'benchmark in a desolate area of investigation' and that 'hopefully it will not be the last' (2002: 223) indicating the lack of research on student attitudes to gay educators.

### **2.2.3.2 Andrew Walters and David Hayes**

Homophobia and discrimination within the school system in the USA are highlighted in Walters and Hayes (1998). This article outlines the extent to which homophobia is present in the USA by citing studies by behavioural scientists, and continues by contextualising this within schools; as social institutions schools reflect the cultural values of society. The article gives examples of how this homophobia is evidenced in extreme cases by the dismissal of gay students and colleagues, and encourages training institutions to provide a fairer environment for gay and lesbian teachers.

Although not emancipatory and overtly political in perspective, both Russ et al and Walters and Hayes highlight homophobia and discrimination in their findings.

### **2.2.4 Preferred approach: lesbian and gay studies.**

As outlined in chapter 3, this researcher comes from a positivist tradition, and although not mutually exclusive, this research is located within the area of

lesbian and gay studies as opposed to queer perspectives or feminist approaches. The reasons for this choice are found within the body of the thesis, but are made explicit here:

- The categories of lesbian and gay, as understood by society (definitions in the glossary) are not the focus of the research. Those who participated in the research identified themselves as lesbian or gay (on the basis of same-sex attraction). The extent to which the participants aligned themselves to wider gay culture was discussed at interview but did not affect their self-identity. Thus the binary understanding of gay / straight rather than the more complex queer / hetero-normative places the study within the lesbian and gay perspective
- The research does not start from a desire for emancipation. No authority due to the researcher's social location is presumed (see chapter 3.2.3). Thus the research is not feminist or political. No discussion as to power relationships based on group identity is in evidence; the research does not come from a lesbian-politico or feminist perspective.
- The research aims to uncover the truth by looking at complex issues that are situated in differing contexts. Nevertheless, the researcher comes from the perspective that there is a reality to be uncovered; the research is not post-structural in persuasion.



## **2.3 Significant themes**

### **2.3.1 Section 28**

When considering the experiences of teachers in secondary schools within the UK reference will need to be made to Section 28. This is the section of the Local Government Act 1988 which stated that: a local authority shall not (a) intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality or (b) promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship. The recent repeal of Section 28 does not seem to have stopped the confusion and wariness of staff when dealing with difficult issues in the classroom. Epstein (2000) highlights that in her research she has discovered that 'lesbian and gay teachers, let alone heterosexual ones were often confused about the direct effects of Section 28 on schools' (2000: 388), and that the symbolic effect of the Act is that the 'large majority of teachers either believe they cannot intervene in this area because of the section, or they are nervous about the issues and do not know how best to deal with them' (2000: 388). Similarly, Moran (2001) discusses the debate that took place around the repeal of Section 28 in both parliament and the media, and places it within the broader context of sex education in Britain. In particular, he proposes the idea that the protection of 'childhood innocence' by disallowing full discussion of issues of sexuality has provided spaces where

homophobic arguments have had some authority. The complexity and misunderstandings surrounding Section 28 and its application in schools will be considered in any study focussing on sexuality in the school context.

### **2.3.2 Role models**

The issue of role models in education has been considered from differing perspectives. The call for male role models in the primary sector has recently been considered by Carrington (2002a), and similarly for role models drawn from ethnic minority communities by Carrington (2002b) and Pole (1999). Carrington and Skelton (2003) considers both issues. However, teachers as gay role models in secondary education is a lacuna in the literature.

Pole (1999) seeks to describe the experiences of black teachers in England and Wales by attempting to 'give voice to the experiences of 20 black teachers at different stages in their careers' (1999: 314). Life histories were taken and questions as to family experiences through to initial teacher training and career path to date were posed. A number of themes emerged from the data, including the influence of black role models at school on the participants, and the link between these experiences and career choice. Pole continues by indicating that the teachers interviewed had become role models themselves in their schools and that they now had the opportunity to present a positive image to young black people; indeed reference was made by participants to 'doing their bit for black

kids' (1999: 319). The article outlines other themes in addition to issues of role model, and concludes by calling for further efforts to combat racism on structural, institutional and individual levels.

Carrington (2002b) warns against viewing role models as a panacea for levels of underachievement among certain parts of ethnic minority communities. He indicates that matching teachers to children by ethnicity in order to improve academic performance is a largely untested assumption, although he does indicate that a greater visibility of teachers from different ethnic minorities makes a positive contribution to pupil perception and understanding of their roles as citizens. His research consisted of five strands, and used a mixture of qualitative and quantitative techniques. First, a national survey of ethnic minority students on one year initial teacher training courses (Post-graduate certificate in education, or PGCE) was undertaken. Here a questionnaire, comprising both closed and open-ended questions was circulated. The second strand consisted of questionnaires given to course leaders, and the third part semi-structured interviews for a cross section of students from the institutions involved. Strand four was in the form of a questionnaire, and strand five consisted of follow-up telephone interviews allowing the research team to glean more information about the teachers' experiences.

This large project offered a number of recommendations for changes in policy, including the requirement for the 'restricted view of minority teachers as role

models to be replaced by a more inclusive form of representation'. Such views surrounding gay role models in schools are echoed by some of the participants in this project (see chapter 4.5).

In a similar vein Carrington and Skelton (2003) challenges the 'lack of clarity and understanding' of the concept of role model, and details their reservations around its use to increase boys' achievement, and that of pupils from ethnic minority communities. Using data taken from semi-structured interviews, analysis leads to the following themes being discussed: 'hostility and suspicion from parents, children and in some cases school staff', and concerns about affirmative action taken to support male teachers in primary education and teachers from the ethnic minorities. In conclusion, Carrington and Skelton show that 'current policies aimed at broadening the composition of the teaching workforce are uninformed by findings in research on role models', and they give implications and practical suggestions in order to support the government in aiming for a more inclusive teaching population.

Carrington (2002a) reports on the under-representation of male teachers in primary education. It begins with a quantitative approach, using questionnaires to elicit the situation for and feelings of men in initial teacher training. Follow up telephone interviews were conducted to explore issues arising from the sample. Policy implications are given for government recruitment campaigns; the assumption of the need for more male teachers in primary schools to act as good

role models was understood. The issue of gay men and lesbians acting as role models was highlighted by participants in this project.

## **2.4 Cognate literature: mixed methods**

Some research has been published where quantitative methods have been used to begin to describe the experiences of gay and lesbian teachers. Where this is the case, surveys are often followed up with in-depth interviews.

### **2.4.1 Janet Powney et al**

A research report commissioned by the DfES and undertaken by the SCRE (Scottish Council for Research in Education) Centre at the University of Glasgow considers teacher career progression and the ways in which age, disability, ethnicity, gender and to a limited extent sexual orientation have an impact on teacher' careers. Powney et al (2003) concludes that 'teachers' motives for entering teaching are diverse' and relate to personal circumstances rather than membership of any minority group, and that career choices are influenced by local politics and government policy rather than other issues.

The research comprised a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods, ranging from large-scale postal surveys to in-depth case studies and submissions from interested individuals and groups. Although this study was

large and conducted on a national scale, little information was collected for sexual orientation, as opposed to gender, ethnicity, age and disability. What information was collected indicated that 22% of all respondents believed sexual orientation to be of some importance in promotion prospects, but unsurprisingly, 'sexual orientation is felt to be more of an issue in promotion by lesbian, gay and bisexual teachers' (2003: 58). Six percent of respondents identified as lesbian or gay; four percent of respondents indicate that their sexual orientation had had a negative impact on their career (that is two thirds of those identifying as gay), while two percent regard it as having some positive impact (that is one third). The numbers are small, and definitive conclusions are difficult to reach.

One quote in the body of the document reports that one teacher who had always been open about being homosexual had found 'colleagues in his various jobs open and honest, respecting people for who they are and what he could contribute' (2003: 36). Only one positive quote from a gay man in a survey involving 2158 teachers was reported; indeed such a positive comment is rare in the literature. The coverage of issues for LGB teachers here is disappointing, considering the addition of 'sexual orientation' in the title of the report.

#### **2.4.2 Ian Warwick et al**

An additional, more recent research report published by the DfES (Warwick et al 2004) was compiled by researchers at the Institute of Education, University of London with members of Schools Out! (see chapter 1) and reviews the extent to which homophobia exists within schools and gives implications for action. As with many reports into homophobia in schools, issues directly relating to students who define as lesbian or gay are addressed in the main. However, some coverage is given to the experiences of gay and lesbian staff. Through questionnaires, 28 organisations and individuals were identified and questioned in semi-structured interviews; some of these individuals were serving gay teachers. The report states that studies into this area are mainly 'small scale and in-depth in nature' and 'have noted the challenges faced when working in heteronormative settings' (2004: 19). Some of the key informants' views (2004: 19-20) have mirrored responses in this project and are highlighted when this is the case within the body of the text.

Schools out! as a pressure group has also published research in the field in order to highlight the difficulties for gay and lesbian staff. Working with 'Teacher Support Network', Schools out! produced press releases of statistics collated from requests for support indicating that '71 per cent of respondents experienced discrimination or harassment by their pupils, 46 per cent by colleagues, 37 per cent experienced it from their managers and 16 per cent from pupils' parents'.

The research does not claim to be representative, but does indicate that discrimination exists (Schools out! Website, accessed April 2006).

### **2.4.3 Jude Irwin**

Irwin (2002) explores the workplace experiences of 120 gay men and lesbians working as teachers or academics in New South Wales, Australia. The research utilised a combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods and included a self-completion survey which 900 workers completed, five focus group interviews and 52 individual interviews. This large scale collaborative project built upon Irwin (1999).

Participants identified both positive and negative workplace experiences, as is reflected in this project. Negative experiences reported included homophobic jokes, verbal and physical harassment, in addition to prejudicial treatment, such as being overlooked for promotion or not being offered the same opportunities within the work place. According to the research 59% of participants recorded experiences of prejudicial treatment or homophobic behaviour. 41% of participants did not specify experiencing any discrimination at all; positive experiences enjoyed by the interviewees were characterised by working in a culture which promoted difference rather than just tolerated it, where the contribution of gays and lesbians was acknowledged and valued. One of the emerging themes was the link between prejudice experienced and openness



about sexual identity; the more closeted<sup>8</sup> a member of staff the less prejudice experienced. This difference in experience according to how widely sexual identity is disclosed by the teacher is noted as a theme in chapter 4.2.

## **2.5 Cognate literature: qualitative research**

### **2.5.1 Tanja Ferfolja**

The number of academic studies published that recount and exemplify the experiences and stories of gay and lesbian staff in secondary education is limited. Ferfolja (1998) presents evidence gathered from six lesbians working as high-school teachers in New South Wales, Australia. They were interviewed about their experiences of student homophobia and how they dealt with this on a practical level. It points towards policy change in as far as staff training and Australian government strategy is concerned.

Ferfolja chose six lesbians from within a 30 kilometres radius of Sydney, four from co-educational government schools, and two from girls' schools. It was thought that the 'exposure to out homosexual lifestyles was relevant to public attitudes towards homosexuality' (1998: 402) (since Sydney is known world-wide for the annual Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Parade, and has a recent history of liberalism in as far as gay rights are concerned). Interviews were

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<sup>8</sup> See Glossary of specialist vocabulary, p. 10.

based on general questions ranging from participants' personal experiences of homophobic harassment through to what they thought was required in schools to reduce homophobia and to educate youth about homosexuality. The interviews were taped, transcribed and analysed. Although this study started from the presumption that homophobic harassment exists, the methodology was similar to that used in this current project.

Ferfolja concludes that most of the harassment experienced by her interviewees was perpetrated by males, predominantly in the 15-19 age group, and concurs with Epstein (1997) in aligning this with traits of 'aggression, competition and independence ... where males are socialised into valued and socially appropriate masculine roles' (Ferfolja 1998: 402). Thus she indicates that lesbians and gay men do not 'fit the acceptable, dominant gender constructions and as such threaten masculine power' (1998: 403).

She continues by giving examples of homophobic harassment experiences and feelings experienced as quoted directly from interview transcriptions. She also uses evidence from the interviews to examine the long term effects of homophobia on the six interviewees and indicates that all of the teachers experienced a long term negative effect either on their teaching styles or their attitude to teaching in general.

In as far as teaching styles are concerned [C] states that 'it made me think twice about making reference to homosexuality in any form ... which is wrong' (1998: 406), although general attitudes to teaching will be more negative if experiences at school have led to feelings such as [E] has gone through: 'I was about to resign and I took stress leave ... and they catapulted me to a counsellor which was of no value at all. It's quite stressful, even now, and it's four years on'. (1998: 406).

Ferfolja (2005) continues her work with lesbian teachers by contextualizing issues of discrimination within faith schools. During her research focusing on Catholic schools in the New South Wales district she discovered discriminatory practices such as threats of dismissal, forced resignations, implicit harassment, and the silencing of lesbianism having a direct impact on the teachers' daily operations and their freedom of speech. Once again, Ferfolja's methodology is of interest to this study. Teachers who volunteered to take part in the study had responded to a questionnaire dealing with identity, harassment and school cultures in relation to lesbian subjectivities. Data was collected from in-depth interviews conducted with 17 self-identified lesbian teachers in New South Wales between 1997 and 2000. The interviews which lasted between 45 and 60 minutes focused on issues relating to teaching in secondary schools, and practice in relation to disclosure of lesbian identities, as well as issues of harassment and discrimination at the school.

She presents her findings on a sliding scale of discrimination. Firstly, issues surrounding the silencing of lesbians in religious institutions were considered, then the way in which the public persona of the teacher can infringe on the private lives of teachers (attendance at Pride rallies etc.), forced resignations, and finally systematic covert harassment. Ferfolja also considers the monitoring of teacher-student interaction that sometimes occurs within schools, by controlling who teachers talk to in the school grounds and blocking social interaction in extra-curricular activities or attendance at school camps. Thus she identifies homophobia and censorship as issues; similar conclusions to those reached in this study.

### **2.5.2 Debbie Epstein**

Epstein (1997) considers schools as institutions which are highly sexualised sites, and includes the experiences of gay and lesbian staff. She argues that struggles around sexuality are linked to those around gender identity, and that explicit homophobia and implicit heterosexism in schools 'derives from and feeds macho and misogynistic versions of masculinity' (1997: 105). Thus, in order to define themselves as heterosexual, males of secondary school age do so by distancing themselves from femininity and homosexuality, which is often shown through explicit homophobia.

Epstein examines these dynamics in four English schools between 1979 and 1993, and her evidence base is primarily the recorded memories of lesbian and gay teachers, students and parents as expressed in a series of interviews carried out in 1992 to 1993. Although some of the experiences from these interviews touched on issues in the primary phase, the main focus for this paper was the way in which versions of masculinity are played out in secondary school environments.

Epstein interviewed 30 students, teachers and parents, (although she does not give exact numbers for each group) and conducted both individual interviews and group discussions. Issues pertaining to teachers are specifically relevant to this thesis, and Epstein gives some evidence as to the difficulty of teaching from inside the closet. Nigel gives an account of being summoned to the head teacher when he visits two gay friends who live next door to a pupil in his school, after the parents complained. He is told that [the parent] 'considers you to be, to have dangerous friends, friends who could be a danger to children' (1997: 112). This occurs in the context of Nigel remaining firmly in the closet in as far as his teaching career is concerned, and is described as a 'horror of horrors' for him. Harry gives evidence of how he acted overly heterosexual with male colleagues to hide the fact that he was gay (Epstein 1997: 114).

Epstein           ... you felt you had to definitely play a part  
Harry            Oh, yes, yes.  
Epstein           Can you tell me a bit about the part?

Harry            The part, I guess the part was to emulate the straight male teachers.

Thus, Epstein gives an insight into the experiences of some gay male teachers in secondary education, but does so in the context of the construction of masculinities, and the requirement of male teachers to emulate this for fear of being outed. In the article she does not give any indication as to the numbers of teachers interviewed, nor the socio-economic background of the institution, but this remains a cognate study to this project.

### **2.5.3 David Nixon and Nick Givens**

Nixon and Givens (2004) explores the experiences of six lesbian, gay and bisexual teachers in relation to their sexual orientation and is of direct relevance here. Leading on from a study into the experiences of a small number of minority ethnic British-born teacher trainees (Givens et al: 1999) in which recommendations for 'explicit anti-racist and multi-cultural curriculum content' were forwarded to 'support wider participation' in Initial Teacher Education (ITE), the study considers the experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual teacher trainees, who represent a 'similarly small, but largely invisible group' (2004: 217). Again, this research indicates the paucity of evidence when it is stated that this group is largely invisible, both 'in terms of presence in the University, and more especially, research evidence about their experiences and problems' (2004: 217).

Participants were sought through a series of personal contacts with initial teacher trainees and 'through a much reduced version of snowball or chain sampling'; this method was used for this current project. Six individuals agreed to be interviewed, two male and four female. Four of the students were training for the primary phase, and two for the secondary phase. In contrast to other studies (see Clarke 1998, Squires and Sparkes 1996) five of these six interviewees were training to teach subjects other than physical education. Interviews of up to one hour were conducted, and questions around five areas of interest (similar to that of the ethnicity study) were identified: academic curriculum, school-based work, life in a hall of residence on campus, social life in the city, and the experience of parental home.

The picture that emerged through the interviews was 'depressingly consistent with the (scarce) literature on the experience of LGB teachers: reticence by the heterosexual majority to address openly the issue of homosexuality; a wider social ignorance about the reality of life for LGB people, both its similarities to and differences from the heterosexual community; and some expected, but still surprising evidence of prejudice', (Nixon and Givens 2004: 219).

Quotes from the interviews then evidence a variety of sub-topics. 'Coming out / being out / staying out' addresses issues of how out trainee teachers feel they can be in the classroom and the associated issues of identity (see chapter 4.2). 'A conspiracy of silence' considers the lack of discussion and openness

concerning the issue of sexuality both in the classroom and within the ITE environment. 'The assault on patriarchy' considers the role of homophobia once again in justifying normative sex and gender boundaries within institutions and wider society.

Two models are then put forward in this paper to explain how any student shapes discourses and is shaped by them, in order to help analyse the narratives of LGB students. Finally, policy and practice is challenged, primarily in ITE departments of universities. Curricular inclusion and raising awareness of the issues is encouraged, as is the provision of non-judgemental administrative procedures and pastoral support. Further research is encouraged and continuing challenge of discriminatory practice demanded.

#### **2.5.4 Andrew Clarke and Gill Sparkes**

Another important body of literature pertinent to this study is the research published by Gill Clarke and Andrew Sparkes. Both have research portfolios in the area of physical education (PE) teaching and PE Initial Teacher Education, and both have show an interest in lesbian issues in this area. Clarke (1998) explores the ways in which lesbian physical education student teachers and serving teachers construct and manage their respective identities within the higher education and schooling system in England. The life stories from which the paper is drawn were from 'personal correspondence and in-depth interviews



conducted with eighteen lesbian physical education teachers during 1993 to 1995' (1998: 62). The interviews for serving teachers focussed on lesbian identity, activities of teaching and relationships with teaching colleagues and pupils. For student teachers life in college was added to experiences on teaching practice.

Beginning her article discussing Section 28 and the resulting self-surveillance of lesbian teachers (see chapter 4.3), Clarke continues by presenting her findings in the context of the requirement to 'perform heterosexuality' and underlines the more pressing requirement of lesbian PE teachers to hide their sexuality as opposed to teachers of other disciplines: 'the impression I get is that if I was a history teacher it would matter less, but because I am dealing with young girls getting changed then I'm immediately a paedophile' (1998: 63).

Clarke continues by outlining how passing<sup>9</sup> as heterosexual can be seen as an act of resistance or subversion and concludes that the narratives reveal the complex and multi-layered process of identity formation and management. She does indicate that she is not claiming that her sample is representative, nor is she arguing for 'any false universalism of their experiences' (1998: 62), but it is noticeable that all of the experiences mentioned in the article concern lesbians who are hiding their sexuality or who have had negative experiences as teachers; no positive experiences were reported.

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<sup>9</sup> See Glossary of specialist vocabulary, p. 10.

Squires and Sparkes (1996) explore moments from the lives of five lesbian PE teachers at different stages in their careers. A series of confidential, open-ended interviews around the lives of the five participants were conducted and the life stories were recorded then transcribed. A thematic analysis highlighted emerging concerns of the teachers. Self censorship (see chapter 4.3) was a common theme in the experiences of the five teachers. Although they had not actually experienced any form of homophobia from colleagues, the anticipation of such was enough to cause 'considerable stress and anxiety' (1996: 83). Participants mentioned difficulties of dealing with innocent questions about their social lives in the classroom, and how coping mechanisms developed over time; it became easier to deal with such situations with age and classroom experience. The issue of role models was considered a theme by the authors: three of the participants expressed feelings of frustration about not being able to provide the children with a positive impression of a lesbian and gay lifestyle, and this theme was also considered important by participants in this current project.

Sparkes (1994a) draws upon some of this data, and in particular a series of life history interviews with a young lesbian PE teacher, who has recently started her career in a secondary school. Various moments from her life as told and written are provided in order to present a view of schooling from a particular standpoint that, for the most part, has been repressed. How 'Jessica' experiences homophobia and heterosexism in educational institutions, how she relates these

experiences to other moments in her life, and the identity management strategies she adopts to cope with specific situations form the basis of the paper. It concludes that taking action against homophobia and heterosexism is the responsibility of all educators regardless of their sexual identity (see also Sparkes 1994b).

This research, although taking only lesbian PE teachers as participants, is useful in this project, and themes drawn out link closely with some of the results presented presently (see chapter 4).

### **2.5.5 Sherry Woods and Karen Harbeck**

Due to the special nature of physical education within the curriculum, more research has taken place at this interface than any other curriculum area. Woods and Harbeck (1992) consider the identity management strategies used by lesbian PE teachers in the US. All twelve women interviewed held two assumptions: firstly that they would lose their jobs if their lesbianism were to be revealed, and secondly that all female PE teachers are often negatively stereotyped as being lesbian. The participants were given three in-depth open-ended interviews each, and were encouraged to reconstruct their experiences and reflect upon their meanings. A different focus guided each of the 90 minute interviews; personal and professional experiences linked to sexuality, concrete details of daily

professional experiences, and a reflection on the possible meanings of these experiences.

Again, the evidence is presented according to identity management techniques: the strategies used to conceal lesbian identity, risk-taking behaviours and finally ways in which the participants had overtly overlapped the personal with the professional. Stereotypes of female PE teachers have been widely documented. Harris and Griffin (1997) surveyed 196 individuals attending the 1995 American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (AAHPERD) convention. Respondents felt that most Americans stereotyped women PE teachers as masculine, aggressive, athletic, lesbian, and unintellectual. Their personal views were less extreme. This has led to more research, both national and international, into the experiences of lesbian PE teachers. Male PE teachers have received much less attention within the literature.

### **2.5.6 Pat Griffin**

Griffin (1992) outlines a study which aimed to 'describe the experiences of thirteen lesbian and gay educators and to empower the participants through collective reflection and action' (1992: 167). Griffin conducted individual open-ended interviews focused on the question 'what is it like to be a gay / lesbian educator?' after having had an initial group meeting to introduce participants to

the project. The interviewees were from all phases of education in the US, from pre-school through middle and high school phases.

Griffin forwards an interesting model of identity management strategies used by gay men and lesbians in education to either deny or affirm their sexuality, showing a continuum from totally closeted, through passing, covering, being implicitly out, being explicitly out, to being publicly out. She presents her findings according to these protection strategies, and as a history of decisions that the group made to act collectively as a response to her findings. The group decided to march together in a local lesbian and gay pride rally, and to start an organisation for lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) educators in Western Massachusetts. She describes the empowerment that was felt after having joined together and marched for social justice.

The model Griffin uses to categorise gay and lesbian teachers by how out they are to the school community is a continuum. Her model does not differentiate between being teachers out to adults on staff and being out in the classroom to students, although she does cite four protection strategies used by gay and lesbian teachers to help them conceal their sexuality, and also to minimise the damage if this knowledge were to become public.

- **Reputation.** According to her research many teachers sought to establish protective reputations. By becoming excellent practitioners, above

reproach and totally professional, management would never be able to challenge their fitness in the classroom because of their sexual identity.

- **Preparation.** Some of those she interviewed developed careful advanced scenario planning as to how to respond if challenged, either by management or by pupils, as to their sexual identity.
- **Regulation.** Participants also protected themselves by regulating how much information about themselves they allowed to become known at school. Many decisions were made about style of clothing, personal sharing with colleagues, informal interaction with students etc. This constant 'wearing a mask' requires vigilance and determination.
- **Separation.** All of the teachers Griffin interviewed mentioned a strict separation between home life and professional life in order to conceal their identity.

Griffin's research was published in the early nineties, and her respondents worked in schools in central USA where attitudes were, and still are, less tolerant than the situations in which many of the interviewees for this project find themselves.

Table 2.1: Identity management strategies

| Totally closeted        | Passing<br>1            | Covering<br>2                 | Implicitly out<br>3                            | Explicitly out<br>4                       | Publicly out            |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|--|---|-------------------------|
| Out to no-one at school | Lying                   | Censoring                     | Telling truth without gay / lesbian labels     | Affirming lesbian / gay identity          | Out to school community |
|                         | I assume you don't know | I assume you don't know       | I assume you know, but I'm not sure            | I know you know. You know I know you know |                         |
|                         | See me as heterosexual  | Don't see me as lesbian / gay | You can see me as lesbian / gay if you want to | See me as Lesbian / Gay                   |                         |

Source: Griffin 1992: 169

On the left of the continuum someone who is totally closeted attempts to pass as heterosexual. Those totally closeted may lie to others in order that they are seen to be heterosexual. Those that cover<sup>10</sup> their sexuality may not lie per se but do not allow others to see them as lesbian or gay. They censor their actions and language to hide their sexual identity. Those who are implicitly out according to this model tell the truth about aspects of their lifestyle but do not overtly label themselves as lesbian or gay. They are happy for others to see them as lesbian

<sup>10</sup> See Glossary of specialist vocabulary, p. 10.

or gay, and assume others know but since all information is implicitly dealt with, no-one knows for sure. Those who are explicitly out affirm their identity publicly and everyone is aware of their sexual orientation.

Those who find themselves on the left of the continuum in as far as work life is concerned experience more separation of personal and professional self, whereas those on the right experience a greater level of integration of the personal and professional. Griffin goes further to suggest that those on the left experience a level of fear, whereas those on the right a certain level of self-integrity. The model is useful and is referred to in chapter 4.2 of this current project.

### **2.5.7 Don Fraynd and Colleen Capper**

Fraynd and Capper (2003) reports a qualitative study in which four leaders of American schools were interviewed: two male and two female, one of each pair were out and the other closeted. The transcripts were analysed according to Grounded Theory (see chapter 3). The study found that the school leaders managed their sexual identity along a continuum, similar to that of Griffin (1992) as outlined above. Interestingly, all four school leaders attempted to maintain a reputation above reproach, again giving credence to Griffin's conclusions.



The school leaders attempted to distance themselves from supporting lesbian and gay issues and adhered to gender role stereotyping to position themselves away from lesbian and gay stereotypes and ensure success in a world where homophobia exists. The authors also point towards mechanisms of internal surveillance used by the head teachers, similar to strategies used by interviewees in this project (see chapter 4.3).

## **2.6 Critical discussion**

The field of literature in this area is comparatively small. Much work published in the area either aims to raise the issue of homosexuality in schools without claiming to be for an exclusively academic audience (Epstein (1994), Jennings and Kissen (1994) for example) or aims to contribute to policy development and changes in practice within educational institutions (Ferfolja (1998), Nixon and Givens (2004) for example). Where published work is close to this current project in terms of substantive area or methodology it is to be noted that conclusions reached are mostly negative and underline the difficulties that gay and lesbian teachers face (Nixon and Givens (2004), Squires and Sparkes (1996), Clarke (1998) for example).

As has also been indicated (see chapter 1), my belief is that gay and lesbian staff do experience some issues or problems, but that personal and anecdotal evidence would suggest that the situation for many gay and lesbian teachers in

secondary schools is one where professional life continues without being hampered by homophobia or discrimination, although this may exist. This project will add to the small amount of research that exists in this area, highlighting the daily experiences of gay and lesbian staff; the influence of the institution on their teaching and career, and the impact of the teacher on the institution. Both positive and negative experiences will be sought, in an attempt to uncover the reality of experience for gay and lesbian teachers. The project will also seek to consider the views of a wide range of secondary school teachers; much published work considers only a limited range of interviewees. For example, Nixon and Givens (2004) considers students following ITE programmes, Ferfolja (2005) interviews lesbians working in Catholic schools, and both Clarke (1998) and Squires and Sparkes (1996) consider lesbian PE teachers.

### **3 Methodology**

This chapter is organised as follows. In the first instance the research question is identified, and the researcher's sociological perspective outlined. This is followed by a description of the choice of methodological tool and the research design. The preparation for the interviews, advertising of the project, and consideration of issues of validity and reliability are described. The tool used for the analysis of the recordings is then described within the context of this project, followed by a description of limitations of the project.

#### **3.1 Introduction**

The literature review has uncovered an area in which published research is minimal; that of the daily experiences of gay and lesbian staff in secondary education, and in particular not only the effect that the institution has on the individual, but also the effect that the individual can have on the institution. Are the effects of the institution on the individual predominantly negative as suggested by the literature? This project will also add to the limited literature available. The research question to be explored is:

**(1) Are the experiences of gay and lesbian school teachers as predominantly negative as the literature suggests or are there positive experiences and narratives to be uncovered?**

In search for the underlying realities of social interaction, sociologists have been categorised according to how they understand society, and this understanding has a direct effect on their methodologies. Many of the founders of sociology believed that it is possible to use the same principles and procedures as used in the social sciences to understand society. Comte (1855), for example, believed that he could prove that the evolution of society revealed invariable laws which could show that the behaviour of humans is governed by principles of cause and effect that are just as invariable as the behaviour of matter as shown by natural scientific research (Giddens 2001: 7). These positivist approaches believe that it is possible to produce statements of cause and effect to describe human behaviour.

Advocates of social action perspectives consider the natural sciences and social sciences as completely different. Unlike 'matter' humans have a consciousness, thoughts, feelings and an awareness of being. Thus, all human interactions contain meaning, 'they do not simply react to external stimuli [as matter does], they do not merely behave – they act (Haralambos 2004: xxii). Max Weber was one of the founding fathers of this perspective. He believed that sociological explanations of action should begin with 'observing and interpreting the subjective states of people's minds' (Haralambos 2004: xxiii, see also Weber 1921). Positivists emphasise facts and cause and effect relationships, whereas social action / interactionist researchers emphasise insight and understanding.

These broad categories of perspective (which subsume wider theories of society: functionalism, Marxism, post modernism etc.) dovetail with two broad categories of research: qualitative and quantitative. Quantitative research is concerned with facts, figures, measurement and statistics; it is a systematic attempt to define, measure and report relationships between different entities, and as such has a tendency to rely on data collected through questionnaires and comparison of measurable features and facts. Qualitative research is concerned with understanding the processes which underlie various behavioural patterns, and as such seeks deep insights using open-ended interview, review of documents and artifacts and participant observations rather than measurable fact.

Evidently, both qualitative and quantitative research tools can be used by both positivists and interactionists. For example, a positivist could use participant observation as a research tool, but they would be seeking cause and effect hypothesis rather than deep understanding of meaning. Due to the nature of the research methods, however, the tools used by the positivist are often quantitative in nature, whereas those for the interactionist are often more qualitative in nature (see Flick 2002: 7-8).

## **3.2 Methodological preliminaries**

### **3.2.1 A different view**

When considering the canon of research in the area of educational inequalities, Foster et al (1996) outlines a methodological standpoint similar to that of this researcher. Having discussed the position of 'old sociologists' (positivists showing a commitment to the scientific research paradigm and relationships of cause) and 'new sociologists' (those interested in how society is constructed and using tools which are more qualitative in approach), the authors continue by giving a 'different view' (Foster et al 1996: 28). In doing so they make clear their belief that research must remain neutral; they make explicit that value judgments and fact are different. For them, no research can ever bring value consensus. Sociological research is restricted to the production of descriptions, explanations and theories, and thus a sharp distinction between the orientation of the researcher and policymaker is drawn. They also accept that much of their research will take place where the focus is 'situationally located' and complex, with all action both large scale and individual being contextualized and effected by 'contingent and changing interrelationships' (Foster et al 1996: 32). This leads to an emphasis on complexity within the social world.

The authors distinguish between three types of research: practical enquiry, theoretical research and substantive research. Practical enquiry is concerned

with daily issues which need resolution. In the course of any type of practice, problems may arise which required attention. Practical enquiry researches what information is needed by practitioners to resolve the situation. This form of research is seen as different in character to the two other, more academic, categories of research. Theoretical research concerns itself with the development and testing of theories. Although the research may be rooted in empirical situations, the focus is theoretical and on the production of well-established accounts of relationships within and between social phenomena. Substantive research is concerned with the description and explanation of particular situations and phenomena. Its aim is to provide factual information which is relevant to at least some of the value arguments which surround the phenomena investigated. It aims to put information into the public domain which is relevant to professional and political debates. It is not to aid particular sides in these debates. This research project is substantive, according to the definitions offered by Foster, Gomm and Hammersley, and aims to describe, explore and critically analyse the research question in (1) above. It aims to research into a situationally complex area, and to offer information which is relevant to current debates. In positioning themselves between 'old' and 'new' sociologists, Foster, Gomm and Hammersley remain positivist in the sense that they are searching for realities; using a variety of research methods they seek to give accounts and explanations of social phenomena, while accepting that there is a reality to be discovered.

### **3.2.2 A different view – defense and justification**

Foster, Gomm and Hammersley are aware of the need for rigour in research. Using the framework as outlined above, they consider the question as to at what point any evidence collected is deemed sufficient to accept any particular claim as true. In doing so, they introduce the concepts of plausibility (relationship between a claim and a existing knowledge) and credibility (the likelihood that the process which produced the claims is free of serious error, in this thesis validity and reliability are discussed). They challenge the research community by offering five norms for behaviour for researchers. The following should be in place:

- 1. The overriding concern is the truth of claims, not political or practical implications**
- 2. Arguments are not judged on the basis of the personal or social beliefs of the person advancing them, but rather in terms of their plausibility and credibility**
- 3. Researchers are willing to alter their views if arguments from common ground suggest they are false**
- 4. The research community is open to all who are able to operate within the first three norms; there must be no rejection on the grounds of political beliefs or religions attitudes etc.**
- 5. When agreement does not exist, all parties must recognize that there could be concerns about the validity of their own positions.**



In the search for understanding of social realities and situations, constant reflection and subsequent refinement of thesis is required by the research community.

This researcher aligns himself with the perspective of Foster, Gomm and Hammersley, in that he aims to research into a situationally complex area, and to offer information which is relevant to current debates. Coming from a positivist perspective, the project aims to describe the reality for the lives of gay and lesbian teachers in secondary education, and to provide factual information which is of use to policy makers. As such the researcher's understanding of interactionism is not in opposition to positivism, and is certainly not relativist in perspective. While considering the complex arena in which teacher experience is located, reality is being uncovered. The choice of methodological tool (chapter 3.3) and theory used to analyse data is consistent both with this particular context and with this perspective (chapter 3.6.3).

### **3.2.3 Standpoint epistemology**

Having outlined the methodological basis upon which this research is based, it is also pertinent at this point to outline the possible contribution of standpoint epistemology to the study, and the reasons for its rejection as a foundation for enquiry.

Standpoint epistemologies (see Stanley and Wise 1990 and 1993) claim to represent the world from a particular socially situated perspective that can lay a claim to epistemic privilege or authority. A complete standpoint theory must specify

- Social location of the privileged perspective
- The scope of its privilege: what questions or subject matters it can claim a privilege over
- The aspect of the social location that generates superior knowledge: for example, social role, or subjective identity
- The ground of its privilege: what it is about that aspect that justifies a claim to privilege
- The type of epistemic superiority it claims: for example, greater accuracy, or greater ability to represent fundamental truths
- The other perspectives relative to which it claims epistemic superiority
- Other modes of access to that perspective: is occupying the social location necessary or sufficient for getting access to the perspective?

In many areas of life such privilege and associated authority of knowledge is accepted and understood. A plumber is generally in a better position than her clients to know what is wrong with their sink. Practical experience in fulfilling the

social role of the plumber grounds the plumber's epistemic privilege, which lays a claim to greater reliability than the judgments of the client.

However, in research this privilege and associated authority of knowledge is often contested (see Grant 1993 and Heckman 1997, for example). They become controversial when they claim epistemic privilege over socially and politically contested topics on behalf of the perspectives of systematically disadvantaged social groups, relative to the perspectives of the groups that dominate them. Typically, in the area of educational research this is the position and experience of ethnic minorities, women and homosexuals, among others. In particular, many feminist theorists link their approach to standpoint epistemology (Stanley and Wise 1990 or Harding 1987 for full discussion). As an oppressed group women have direct experience of their oppression, unlike men, whose privilege enables them to ignore how their actions affect women as a class. Therefore, they have a deeper understanding of issues relating to gender discrimination, and therefore have authority of knowledge, according to feminist standpoints.

#### **3.2.4 Personal information**

As stated above, this researcher comes from a positivist standpoint, and as Foster, Gomm and Hammersley, he sees social reality as one to be uncovered and described, even when this reality is hidden beneath a vast complexity of

interaction and contextualisation. He rejects the privilege of standpoint epistemology, and makes no reference to authority of knowledge gained from his own position.

However, it is pertinent at this point to add some auto-biographical details. These do not alter the findings of this project, but help the reader locate the researcher. I am a secondary teacher with ten years experience teaching in the state sector in the North East of England. I have had a successful career to date, and at time of writing am head of Modern Languages at an 11-18 school in Durham. I am a gay man who is out in the staff room, and assumed to be gay by many students; certainly within the sixth form I am seen as gay, although this had not been confirmed to the students. I have, in the past, been involved in Schools out! Newcastle, which is a social network for gay teachers. This background helped me access enough gay and lesbian teachers to consider this research project for the EdD.

### **3.3 Choice of methodological tool**

Educational research often involves both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Indeed, this is seen as good practice as it allows for a greater level of credibility. Triangulation of methods supports the internal validity of inquiry (Cohen et al. 2003: 108 and below). However, for this research it was decided that qualitative interviewing would be the primary tool used in collecting data (see

below for further discussion). Qualitative or semi-structured interviewing, although wide in variety, has the following 'four features in common' (Mason 2002: 61):

1. The interactional exchange of dialogue
2. The relatively informal style
3. A thematic, topic-centred, biographical or narrative approach
4. A belief that knowledge is situational, and the job of the interview is to bring relevant contexts into focus, and the interview later studied for meaning and understanding.

It can be seen that these four features are useful in attempting to answer the research question in (1) above. In searching for accounts of experiences a thematic approach is required, as is a relatively informal style when dealing with issues that some interviewees may not feel comfortable talking about. Rather than a structured interview, allowing a more interactional exchange may bring further insights into experiences, and later study of the transcripts should bring a clearer meaning (See Miller and Glassner 2004, or Holstein and Gubrium 2004).

Four features alone, however, can only suggest this research tool as the main method of collecting data. Mason (2002: 62) lists further reasons why researchers may choose qualitative research techniques, and among these reasons is the fact that the data may not be available in any other form. This was the primary reason for the choice of semi-structured interview as methodological

tool. In order to gather narratives and stories from gay men and lesbians working in secondary schools it is not possible to write to head teachers asking them to publicise such a project, or indeed to approach their gay staff. Obviously, either the head teacher may be unaware of their gay staff, or she / he may have exhibited homophobic behaviour. Gay teachers may not respond to flyers publicising research in any case. Thus any form of social survey, or of more quantitative-style questionnaires becomes not only too difficult to administer within the limitations of this project, but would only produce limited data that would meet the requirements of the research question. Powney et al (2003), for example, although a larger scale project, did not allow for focused in-depth discussion of the issues, and generated only a limited amount of data when only certain questions were able to be considered from the perspective of sexuality.

### **3.4 Research design**

In order to discover the reality of the experiences of gay and lesbian teachers in schools, semi-structured interviews were designed. These interviews had three discrete parts: topic cards containing questions on a specific area allowing more flexibility for the interviewer to probe for deeper meaning; stimulus material eliciting opinion rather than experience; and an invitation to recount stories and experiences not covered in the main body of the interview.

The following procedure, outlined here, will be described in detail in this chapter. The project was advertised and participants were then found. Both the requirements and ethical safeguards were outlined in a letter and the interview subsequently took place (in order to ensure quality at interview, two practice interviews were conducted with close contacts of the researcher (see below)). The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and both checked by the interviewer. The participants were sent copies of the transcription to check that what was said was an accurate picture of their experiences and opinions. If the interviewee did not recognise the transcript as a true reflection of their opinions and experiences this was discussed and a consensus was reached.

The interviews were then read in detail, compared, and themes drawn out according to Grounded Theory (see chapter 3.6.3). The shades of opinion and experience within each theme were then logically ordered and the results compiled. The research process will now be described in further detail.

### **3.4.1 The interview**

The four common features of qualitative research as mentioned above disallow a strict interview schedule. Such a schedule would limit discussion and stop the researcher probing important comments in order to find meaning and fuller narratives. Thus, researchers must prepare themselves thoroughly in advance in

order to be able to 'think on their feet' in an effective and coherent way which is consistent with their research questions (Silverman 2003: 89).

The topics that were chosen were consistent with the research question in (1) above, and many were highlighted in the literature review above. The topics were: the experiences they have had as a gay teacher; any experiences of gay students that they are aware of; the idea of being a role model; the need or desire to be out to either the staff or students; the effect being gay has had on their teaching and in their classroom; and any possible effects being gay has had on the wider curriculum. A series of open questions were written and put on separate 'topic cards'. These were used as a prompt and put to one side once all of the relevant issues had been discussed. As the interviews progressed small changes were made in question wording and a certain amount of reflection constantly occurred. The interviews were structured as follows:

Table 3.1: Structure of interview

|                          |  |
|--------------------------|--|
| Introductory explanation | An explanation of the project and outline of the interview was read to each of the interviewees  |
| Opening questions        | Opening questions to settle the interviewees were posed. These asked about experiences of teaching, but did not raise issues of sexuality. |
| Topic Cards              | Topics were then discussed (see cards below)   |
| Invitation for stories   | Interviewees were asked if they had any stories or narratives that they wanted to share that were not covered by the theme cards, or       |



|                             |  |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Your cutting out experience | that they had forgotten at that particular part of the interview   |
| Stimulus cards              | Stimulus cards were presented (see below)  |
| Invitation for comments     | The interview was finished by asking interviewees if they had any more comments to make, and by thanking them for participating. |

### 3.4.2 Topic cards

The topic cards were drawn up as a simple technique to allow the interviewer to respond to the respondents in a flexible way, and allowed the interviewer to give the respondents greater freedom when recounting narratives or opinions. On a practical level, once a certain topic was exhausted the card was put to one side, or when another topic broached, the interviewer was able to turn discretely to the appropriate card. The contents of each of the cards are recorded here:

Table 3.2: Topic Cards

#### Questions concerning your career so far

- Why did you choose to become a teacher?
- What position do you now hold?
- Give a brief description of your career to date?
- Do you hold a position of responsibility? What does that involve?
- Do you enjoy being a teacher? Why (not)?
- Do you feel you made the correct decision going into teaching?

### **Your coming out experiences**

Tell me your experiences of coming out

Are you out to your family and friends?

How out are you in your current job? Are you just out to some staff, all staff, some pupils, all pupils?

What responses have you felt from staff? Positive and negative responses.

Are you out to your management? Would this make a difference? Are there any other out members of staff?

### **Personal experiences at work**

Describe your experiences at work linked to your sexuality. Give both positive and negative experiences.

Have you felt acceptance or inclusion as a gay man / woman? Have you been able to help children / other gay staff? Have you altered perceptions on staff?

Have you experienced any discrimination because of your sexuality?

If you are happy to do so, give me some examples. Have you experienced negative comments from students? Did they know you were gay?

Do you hear homophobic jibes made to or about other staff, even if the person is not gay?

Do you attempt to hide your sexuality by acting straight?

### **The experience of gay students**

Are you aware of any gay students at your school? Are

you out to them, or do you attempt to give them support in any way? Have you met any on the scene<sup>11</sup>, and what is their response to you?

Does homophobia exist within your school or is there a prevailing indifference among students?

Do you think pupils have positive or negative opinions of gay men and lesbians at school?

Is homophobia part of the anti-bullying policy?

Is there a homophobic sub-culture, or has the media brought about a more positive spin on gay issues?

Could students be out at your school?

Is the situation in the VI form different in any way?

What was your experience as a gay student at school?

Were you out? Was that helpful?

How do you respond to homophobic remarks between students?

### **Role models**

Were there any out gay teachers when you were at school?

Were there any teachers who you knew were gay? Were there any that you found out at a later date were gay?

Do you feel that it is important for pupils to have gay role models in school?

Why are you out / not out at work? Could you be a positive role model?

Do you feel being out / not out is an issue of integrity for you?

### **Heterosexism in school**

How do you respond to questions about your private life /

---

<sup>11</sup> Collection of gay venues within a geographical area; see Glossary of specialist vocabulary, p. 10.

wife / husband?

Do you feel that other members of staff are too open about their private lives, this having a knock on effect on you?

Is there a public assumption that everyone is straight, or is the possibility of queer lifestyles alluded to?

Does gay sex appear in the sex education curriculum?

Is homophobia renounced in the curriculum in the same way racism and sexism are?

#### **Curriculum and classroom issues**

What is your curriculum area?

Have you attempted to include queer issues in your curriculum area?

Do you mention homophobia and check it when appropriate?

Is your classroom a safe place for children, and is it more inclusive in your opinion, because of your stance on gay issues?

After asking participants about their career to put their experiences into context and to relax them at interview the topics relate to the research question in the following way:

- **Your coming out experiences;** how far gay men and lesbians disclose their sexuality to others can mirror their opinions and actions in the classroom

- **Personal experiences at work;** these highlight the interface between teacher and secondary school and give positive and negative accounts of effects and influences both parties have on each other
- **The experience of gay students;** these outline how safe an institution is for both gay student and teachers, and highlight moments when teachers have had an impact on the pupils
- **Role models;** opinions and experiences given here also highlight times when teachers can have or have had a positive impact on pupils
- **Heterosexism in school;** how much an institution expects or assumes heterosexuality, without necessarily having homophobic intentions, can impact on the daily life of a gay teacher
- **Curriculum and classroom issues;** the core duty of teachers is to have an impact on teaching and learning within the classroom, and teachers can influence pupil opinion on issues of homosexuality on a small scale in their teaching.

### 3.4.3 Stimulus material

The stimulus material was designed to elicit opinion rather than experience and is a form of projective technique. Projective techniques are used to explore deeply held attitudes and motivations that would often not be verbalized by respondents when questioned directly. They are indirect interviewing methods which enable

respondents to project their views, beliefs and feelings onto a third-party or into some task situation. Various types of projective techniques exist including free word association, sentence completion and completion tests (where respondents complete a story or narrate according to pictures). The Thematic Appreciation Test can include the type of stimuli that was used in interviews for this project. In the Thematic Appreciation Test one or more pictures or accounts that serve as stimuli are shown to the respondents who are asked to create stories concerning relationships or social situations suggested by the pictures. They describe what is happening, what dialogue might be going on between characters, and/or how the “story” might continue (Ehigie and Ehigie 2005: 623).

The purpose of the stimulus material used was to gather evidence for what is instinctively known by lesbians and gay men in secondary education. Rather than focusing on their direct experiences, the stimulus cards were used to focus on the interviewees’ opinions and instinctive understanding in order to document such evidence, and this was a form of projective technique similar to the Thematic Appreciation Test. Seven stimulus cards were discussed:

**Stimulus Card One** is a photocopy of an article that appeared in the TES in the summer of 2003. Entitled ‘Lords throw out gay bullying case’ the article outlines the situation of a lesbian teacher who allegedly suffered from five years of homophobic abuse in her school, experiencing taunts such as ‘lezzie shit’ and ‘nasty dyke’ and having an open can of cat food placed in her pocket (the

stereotype of lesbians as cat lovers being understood here). She had been seeking compensation against her school who, she claimed, had failed to tackle the abuse. She had lost in the court of appeal and at two employment tribunals because her case was not covered by the Sex Discrimination Act, because the abuse was 'motivated by her sexual orientation rather than her gender' (TES: 17 June 2003, 24). This card was used as an example of homophobic abuse within a secondary school, and the taunts by the children and lack of support of leadership highlighted. Interviewees were asked whether or not they believed this to be typical for some teachers, and for any stories or evidence they had of such treatment.

**Stimulus Card Two** dates from the time before Section 28 was repealed. Again taken from the TES in the summer of 2003, this article entitled 'Section 28 and a legacy of confusion' (TES: 4 July 2003, 8) outlines the difficulty teachers faced when dealing with issues of homosexuality within the classroom. This card was used as a stimulus to ask interviewees about their personal experiences of Section 28, both before and after its repeal, and to open discussions as to their thoughts and feelings about its existence.

In order to inquire into how safe they felt their school was for gay and lesbian students, **Stimulus Card Three** was presented to the interviewees. This is a photograph of a teenage girl in a busy school playground holding a banner showing the phrase 'Proud 2B out at school'. This stimulus led to comments on

how out pupils could be at school, and how they acted with their peers. It also led to discussions as to how appropriate the interviewees felt public display of homosexuality is, and what they felt about the need and usefulness of pride events, and public 'coming out events'.

**Stimulus Card Four** is a copy of an article taken from the online archive section of the TES. The article gives information about Harvey Milk High, an American high school in New York which is attended by young gay men and lesbians who have experienced hostility and bullying in their original schools. Interviewees were invited to give comment on this school and its wider implications.

Taken from the research report commissioned by the DfES (Powney et al 2003), **Stimulus Card Five** is a quote which says 'four percent of all respondents [of all sexualities] indicate that their sexual orientation has had a negative impact on their career, while two percent regard it as having some positive impact'. This quote was used to ask interviewees to reflect personally, in addition to asking what they thought these negative and positive experiences could be. (Here, six percent of all respondents defined as homosexual; two thirds (i.e. four percent of the total) had negative experiences, one third (i.e. two percent of the total) had reported negative experiences.

**Stimulus Card Six** contains two quotes from the Stonewall website, and again asks interviewees for their views, and attempts to access what they innately



know as a gay or lesbian teacher in secondary education. The first quote is from a thread (log page posted on the Internet which can be accessed and added to by the public) of personal experiences. It states:

'Reading your mails I felt I wanted to write. I am an out gay teacher in a secondary school. I know that I am very lucky. I came out as a result of homophobic abuse from small minded students. I had a lot of chats with my head and he is extremely supportive as are the governors. I told my tutor group of year nines during tutor time. They were great. I now have a large group of students that come to me with issues around their sexuality. The head is looking at how we as a school can develop a comprehensive support package for gay, lesbian and bisexual students.'

The other is from the body of the Stonewall website itself. It is taken from the aims and objectives and mission statement for the group, in as far as teaching, pupils and schooling is concerned. It states that:

'Stonewall believes that every child and young person has the right to learn in a safe, supportive and respectful environment, but that it believes that homophobic bullying is still widespread and that lesbians and gay men in teaching feel vulnerable and unsafe.'

**Stimulus Card Seven** is a selection of quotes, some from Harvey Milk on the night of the defeat of the Briggs Initiative which would have banned the employment of gay and lesbian teachers in the California public school system, and one from the preface of a text entitled *One Teacher in Ten* which tells the stories of gay and lesbian educators in the USA. All the quotes are encouragements for teachers to come out to their students: 'Every gay person must come out' and 'A school with an openly lesbian or gay teacher is a better school'. This was used as a stimulus to ask the interviewees whether or not they

agreed, and whether or not it was possible for a teacher to come out completely at their school.

#### **3.4.4 Invitation for comment**

As outlined in the introduction to the interview read to each of the respondents interviewees were asked if they had any more stories or experiences that they perceived would have been helpful to the research. This allowed respondents a greater ownership of the interview process and often led to some interesting narratives.

### **3.5 Advertising the project and identifying interviewees**

Once the research design was complete interviewees needed to be identified. Finding teachers willing to be interviewed proved to be extremely challenging (see chapter 3.5.3) although ethical safeguards were put into place, the basic requirement to make sure that the research was valid placed additional requirements on the participants that sometimes proved too much of a barrier to participation. Ethics and issues of triangulation are discussed presently.

### **3.5.1 Ethical safeguards**

The subject of ethics in social research can sometimes be complex. In certain branches of research access to participants is difficult, and in others issues of confidentiality and privacy impossible to maintain. Within the purview of this project, however, the two main ethical safeguards required were anonymity and the informed consent of the interviewees.

The following guidelines for reasonably informed consent were followed. All participants were to be given both in the initial letter for those interested and verbally at the beginning of the interview (based on Cohen et al 2003: 51):

1. A fair explanation of the procedures to be followed and their purposes
2. A description of possible discomforts and benefits of participation
3. An offer to answer any inquiries concerning the procedures
4. An instruction that the person is free to withdraw consent and to discontinue participation at any time and without prejudice to the participant.

In as far as anonymity is concerned the following guidelines were adhered to (based on Bell (1991) 'Conditions and guarantees for educational research projects'):

1. All participants will be offered the opportunity to remain anonymous
2. All information will be treated with the strictest confidentiality
3. Interviewees will have the opportunity to verify statements when the research is in draft form, and negotiation entered into where the interviewees found the transcript to be an incorrect mirror of their opinions and experiences
4. Participants will receive an electronic copy of the final report
5. Should the project reach publication permission will be sought from the participants.

In this research all of the names of the participants and their schools have been changed, in addition to any names of children cited at interview. This gives anonymity to any colleagues or school leaders who may be mentioned by the interviewees. Since a large amount of information is given within the body of the interviews, it could feasibly be possible to identify schools and therefore team leaders and staff members without such pseudonyms being adopted. The only personal information about the staff member not to be altered is their subject area, as this is pertinent to some of the questioning within the interview. The respondents were given the opportunity not to give their subject specialism, although none refused to do so.

Both of these safeguards were made clear to the participants in the letter of explanation given to all potential respondents and in the introduction to the

interview. Interviewees were offered copies of their transcript for comments as a safeguard. Interviewees could have withdrawn consent at this stage if they felt that the transcript did not maintain their anonymity.

### **3.5.2 Validity**

Issues of reliability and validity are fully discussed below. However, requirements for triangulation (the crosschecking of information by looking at different sources, methods and tools used to obtain it in order to support claims of validity, see Holliday 2002 or Stake 1995) put additional requirements on the participants.

Since the methodology used was qualitative in nature and triangulation of methodology difficult due to the nature of the study, the following requirements were made of the interviewees:

- A CV (with the option of deleting personal information) was requested. This was to give an indication of teacher experience and ability in case issues of discrimination were to arise
- The name of a close colleague at school was required. Again, this was requested so that another source could be accessed to verify information. This was only used on two occasions, but the knowledge that narratives could be checked, it was hoped, encouraged participants to be precise.

These additional aspects of the research process were integrated in order to increase the validity of the project, although they discouraged several participants from taking part.

### **3.5.3 Identifying interviewees**

In order to make contact with gay and lesbian teachers varying approaches were adopted. Several personal contacts were approached in the first instance, flyers and posters were left on the Newcastle gay scene (gay pubs, clubs, saunas, community premises), an advert was placed in free gay regional publications (*Boyz, the Pink Paper*) and a web page left active on [gaydar.com](http://gaydar.com) and [gaydargirls.com](http://gaydargirls.com). Much effort was put into contacting teachers in this way, and with a large interest refined sampling techniques could have been accessed. However, only one interviewee made contact through advertising.

All of the other interviewees were 'friend of a friend' style contacts, who having completed the interview themselves, were able to give personal assurances to their contacts of the genuine nature and safety of the process. Thus, worries about techniques used to ensure validity were often overcome. This snowball sampling where 'participants are identified by earlier participants in a study' was also used to identify participants by Nixon and Givens (2004) when researching the experiences of LGB trainee teachers (see chapter 2). The initial contacts were personal friends or colleagues from schools or members of PGCE cohorts I

had taught in the past. As mentioned below (chapter 4.2) three of the interviewees were guarded about their sexuality in the school context, and these three participants agreed to take part as a personal favour. These transcripts therefore give access to a wider selection of participants with different opinions and experiences.

Due to the nature of snowball sampling, it was difficult to provide a representative sample for comment. However, it was the intention to gather experiences from both men and women, and from teachers at varying stages of their career. Sometimes this proved difficult due to the numbers of teachers willing to participate, although a certain spread of experiences was reached. Twenty interviews took place in total, and the following table gives an initial short description of the positions and experience of the participants.

**Table 3.3: Participants and contexts**

| <b>Name</b> | <b>Position</b>                                   | <b>Comment</b>  |
|-------------|---|---|
| Iain        | Newly Qualified Teacher of Modern Languages (MFL) | Iain works in a high-achieving catholic secondary school.   |
| Lisa        | English teacher, main scale                       | Lisa has worked in two schools in the North-east of England. The first, an inner-city comprehensive, and her current post in a high-achieving school on the outskirts of Middlesbrough. |
| Emily       | 2 <sup>nd</sup> in English                        | Emily works in an inner-city comprehensive school in Newcastle  |

|          |  |   |
|----------|--|---|
| Heather  | 2 <sup>nd</sup> in Geography                                     | Heather works in a comprehensive school in Durham, with a very mixed intake.  |
| Joan     | Teacher in charge of specialist unit for visually impaired       | Joan began her career as an Religions Education specialist, and later moved into special needs management, before specialising. She now runs the unit for the visually impaired, provides in-service training (INSET) and supports classroom teachers.                            |
| Jonathan | Teacher of History, Deputy Head                                  | Jonathan is very recently retired. He began his career as a teacher of history, before becoming head of department and then deputy head. He worked in an inner-city comprehensive, with a very deprived catchment area.   |
| Morgan   | Science teacher, Assistant Head                                  | Morgan began his career as teacher of science before becoming head of year. He is currently assistant head teacher in charge of the lower school site of a comprehensive, with a deprived catchment area.   |
| Fiona    | Science teacher, main scale                                      | Fiona has worked in two schools in the North-east of England. The first, a high-achieving comprehensive in South-Tyneside, and then a prestigious fee-paying school in the North-east, after having had a career break.   |
| Alison   | Newly Qualified Teacher in Maths                                 | Alison is a main scale teacher of maths in a North-east comprehensive with a very mixed intake.   |
| Mark     | Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO), teacher of maths | Mark has worked in three comprehensive schools, all of mixed intake in the North of England. Having begun his career as a teacher of maths, and having been second in department, he is now SENCO and teacher in charge of inclusion at a very large comprehensive in Darlington. |
| Ruth     | 2 <sup>nd</sup> in History                                       | Ruth works in a city centre comprehensive with a very mixed intake.   |
| Howard   | Head of Maths, teacher in charge of timetable                    | Until recently Howard was head of maths in a city centre comprehensive with a very mixed intake.  |



|        |  |   |
|--------|--|---|
|        |  | Now semi-retired, he teaches AS and A2 maths in two North-east comprehensives.  |
| Tony   | Head of Modern Languages   | Tony has worked in three schools in Sunderland and Darlington. He has been head of MFL in two schools, both of average intake, the first being a denominational school.   |
| Simon  | Teacher of History, Head Teacher                                     | Simon has worked in several schools in Sunderland, having been teacher in charge of general studies, head of history, head of VI form, deputy head, acting head, and now head of a large inner-city comprehensive whose catchment is very deprived. |
| Paul   | Head of Geography<br>Second in VI form                               | Paul has worked in three comprehensive schools: as geography teacher in an inner city school, second in VI form in a Durham school with mixed intake, and second in VI form in another North-east school, again with a mixed intake.                |
| Peter  | Teacher of Maths and Information and Communications technology (ICT) | Peter has worked as teacher of maths and ICT in various schools in the region, and is currently supply teacher. He has experience of working in a school also working with children with educational and behavioural difficulties (EBD).            |
| Julie  | Teacher of Modern Languages and ITE lecturer                         | Julie has worked in three schools before moving to part-time in order to pursue wider educational positions, including PGCE (post graduate certificate in education) lecturer and educational publishing.   |
| James  | Head of Music  | James has worked in three schools in the North-east. He is currently head of music in a school in challenging circumstances.  |
| Oliver | Teacher of Art in charge of Design                                   | Oliver has worked in two inner-city schools in the North-east area. He has a position of responsibility for design within the art department.   |
| Chris  | Assistant Head, teacher of Business                                  | Chris has worked in several schools in the North-east; he was head of business at a high achieving comprehensive, and then assistant head teacher at  |

|  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
|  |  | a mixed intake comprehensive. He is currently acting deputy. |
|--|--|--|

Source: data collected from study, all names have been anonymised.

The comments are drawn from the initial discussions about interviewees' careers to date. They were checked by the participants at the same time as they reviewed their transcripts. All names and schools have been changed, although subject specialism and position remains the same, with the agreement of all of the participants. The geographical areas quoted have also been altered.

Taking the initial difficulties met when looking for participants into account this number compares favourably with other in-depth studies. It is also interesting to note that a spread of gender and experience was found. The following tables give an indication of this spread:

Table 3.4: Gender of participants

|        |    |
|--------|----|
| Male   | 12 |
| Female | 8  |

Table 3.5: Promoted position of participants

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Main scale   | 6 |
| Junior promotions<br>(some responsibility within departmental structure) | 5 |
| Middle management  | 5 |
| Senior Leadership team   | 3 |

Having identified the teachers the interviews then took place according to the schedule outlined above. Issues linked to recording and transcribing the interviews to ensure reliability and validity are discussed below.

### **3.6 Recording, transcription and analysis - issues of reliability and validity**

Throughout the recording, transcription and analysis of the interviews due emphasis was placed on ensuring that the process was as reliable and valid as possible. After defining validity and reliability, the methods used to enhance the project in this respect will be outlined.

Validity can be defined as the quality achieved when questioning provides an accurate measurement of that which is being investigated. That is to say questioning should actually produce the information required; the type of question, the way in which it is asked, the way in which the researcher checks that this is indeed correct all support the researcher to uncover reality. Researchers must always check that the correct methods have been used to uncover the reality, and all possible support structures put into place in order to eliminate interference in this procedure (Cook and Campbell 1979, Moore et al 2005).

Reliability is the quality achieved when questionnaires and interviews have been completed consistently, in order to accurately compare data. Thus, reliability is the consistency of measurement, or the extent to which, if repeated, the same results would be produced (Cook and Campbell 1979). For results to be credible, social researchers must ensure that their results are reliable and valid. The structures included in this research added in order to best eliminate interference are outlined presently.

### **3.6.1 Recording**

In order to ensure that the results were reliable only one researcher conducted the interviews, and they all followed the same format outlined above. The researcher conducted two practice interviews with personal contacts in order to refine his skills. Any issues were then discussed and interview technique improved. In addition, due to the potentially personal nature of the subject matter the following strategies were put into place:

- The choice of venue was entirely up to the respondent. The homes of the respondent or researcher were possibilities, as was neutral territory
- Before the formal interview took place informal conversation took place to put the respondent at ease

- At the beginning of the interview it was made clear that the recording could be stopped if required
- During the interview the researcher attempted to be as responsive as possible; the questions having been placed on topic cards facilitated this
- The questions and structure of the interview had been carefully considered in advance in order to avoid bias and leading questions. A good attempt was made so that supplementary comments and questions were not leading, but drew out further meaning and opinion.

Questioning technique is a skill to be continually reviewed, however it is relevant to restate that none of the interviewees indicated that any of the transcripts revealed misinformation about their experiences or opinions, which underlines the effectiveness of the interviewing technique.

### **3.6.2 Transcription**

The transcription of the interviews was done privately and as such several safeguards needed to be put into place:

- Full confidentiality was required on ethical grounds and to ensure that the participants felt comfortable. The typist used was based in Bedford and worked for a company based in the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender community (LGBT), and was therefore comfortable with

transcribing the material recorded. She also signed a declaration of confidentiality.

- The transcriptions were listened to and checked by the researcher in order to add any non-verbal elements which the typist may not have understood, and in order to clarify any sentences or words which were context bound or difficult to hear on the recording.
- All names of schools, pupils and staff were changed at this stage using find and replace options on Microsoft Word.

### **3.6.3 Analysis – Grounded Theory**

Analysis of the transcripts was conducted according to Grounded Theory (Charmaz 2000, Glaser and Strauss 1967, Strauss and Corbin 1990). The basic idea of the Grounded Theory approach is to read and re-read a textual database (such as the series of transcripts in this project) and "discover" or label variables (categories, concepts and properties) and their interrelationships. This is described presently.

The primary objective of Grounded Theory is to develop theory from data using an inductive approach, meaning that it moves from the specific to the more general. Once the specific data has been collected a categorisation of elements is then undertaken to present themes as results from the specific data, rather

than beginning with a hypothesis and seeking data to prove or disprove it. This categorisation of elements within the data is known as open coding. Typically the data is read and re-read and similarities in theme or experience labelled. This process continues and is refined until specific themes emerge, and the results are then ordered logically in order to make sense of the original corpus of data.

It is here that a distinction will be made between topics and themes. In this project topic cards were used within the body of the interview. These 'topics' often derived from the wider literature and issues that other researchers had identified as pertinent to the research (see chapter 2), in addition to stemming directly from the research question identified. The term 'theme' is used to describe the categories that resulted from the open coding process as mentioned above.

The transcripts were studied and coded essentially answering the questions 'what is this about?' and 'what is being referenced here?' The transcripts were re-read and quotes and narratives brought together according to theme, sliced and placed in separate documents. A further reading of the collections of data allowed for a logical progression within the narratives to be drawn together, and relationships and meaning brought to the surface. These themes are presented in the results chapter of the thesis.

Cohen et al (2003) indicates that any problems with a lack of validity can be minimised by ensuring that the following is in place:

- Respondent validation. In this project after the interview was transcribed each of the respondents was sent an electronic copy of the interview and invited to make comment. In particular they were asked to read the script to identify any areas where their true feelings and experiences were not accurately described for any reason. None of the respondents wanted any changes to be made, which indicates that the interviews were well conducted without bias or assumptions being made by the interviewer.
- An avoidance of poor coding. Only one researcher was involved in the analysis of the results and therefore each of the transcripts was coded in the same way. This avoids differences within the results of the project, but relies on the researcher coding thoroughly and without prejudice.
- An avoidance of making inferences beyond the scope of the data. All of the statements made within the results section of the thesis are presented with supporting evidence.
- An avoidance of a selective use of data. Once themes were identified all of the comments made by the respondents were identified. Only comments which involved repetition were not used in the body of the text, and when this occurs appropriate signposting is given to indicate that some omissions have been made.



During the analysis stage of the research triangulation techniques were employed to support the validity of the research. Lincoln and Guba (1985: 219) include this in a list of methods to ensure credibility in qualitative research. Although triangulation of methodology was less appropriate for this study, the checks and balances introduced into the research process to ensure that the research was valid have been outlined (requirement for a CV and contact details of a colleague were requested in order that different sources could be accessed to verify context and some narratives).

Grounded Theory is compatible with a positivist approach. Glaser and Strauss state that obtaining 'accurate facts is important' (1973: 12), in addition to 'furthering the theories on discovering theory from data'. In later work, Strauss and Corbin (1990) state their belief that 'theory derived from data is more likely to resemble reality than from putting together a series of concepts based on experience. Grounded theories, because they are drawn from data, are likely to offer insight and enhance understanding' (1990: 4). Thus, the aim of Grounded Theory is to uncover social reality from a corpus of data. This tool was used to analyse the data in this project because it dovetails with the positivist perspective of the researcher as outlined in chapter 3.2, and can be applied to the interviews conducted for this research. This positivist approach has critics within the literature, but this is beyond the scope of this thesis. For detailed discussion see Denzin et al 200, Gomm 1994, Hamersley 1992 and Silverman (1993 and 2003).

### **3.7 Limitations of the project**

It is important to note that the number of interviews that took place compares favourably with other in-depth studies; finding so many secondary teachers in the North-east of England who define as gay or lesbian was difficult. However, some limitations existed when undertaking the research and these are outlined presently in order that the process is transparent, and results viewed accordingly.

- **Lack of quantitative strand to research;** in a larger scale project whole populations could be chosen and questionnaires administered. Within these questionnaires all teachers could be asked questions about their sexuality and some conclusions made. This type of approach was used by Powney et al (2003) in the DfES report. However, as seen above (chapter 3.3) such an approach would not have allowed for focussed in-depth discussion of the issues. Indeed, Powney et al generated only a limited amount of data when only certain questions were considered from the perspective of sexuality.
- **Limitations of snowball sampling;** although this was the most appropriate and effective method of identifying participants, since contacts are made through friendship groups or work colleagues there is the possibility that the sample becomes unrepresentative. In this instance, for example, friends may have similar outlook, colleagues may only be able to

identify other colleagues who are out in the staffroom rather than closeted at work etc.

- **Refusals to participate;** it is unknown why some contacts refused to participate; four specific contacts did not wish to take part. This could be due to fear of having their sexuality disclosed at a school where discrimination may exist. Conversely, this could be to lack of interest in the subject matter, lack of time etc. Some attention was paid to this issue in that three of the participants took part as a personal favour. These participants see sexuality as a personal issue, and reported that under normal circumstances they would not have taken part in the process.
- **Limitations due to choice of interviewees;** since analysis of the results one area for further research has been highlighted, that of heterosexual teachers who conform to gay stereotypes (effeminate men and butch<sup>12</sup> women). Further analysis of the experiences of this group may uncover parallels in experience and help better understand the motives and opinions of pupils and staff in as far as perceived sexuality is concerned.

In summary, once the research gap had been identified an appropriate methodology that is consistent with the sociological perspective of the researcher was chosen. The research design that was used included both semi-structured interview and response to stimulus cards. The method used to identify participants was similar to that of snowball sampling as interviewees were difficult

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<sup>12</sup> See Glossary of specialist vocabulary, p. 10.

to find. The transcriptions were then analysed according to Grounded Theory and the results are outlined below in chapter 4, as this tool was also consistent with the researcher's perspectives.

## **4 Results**

### **4.1 Introduction**

Using Grounded Theory as the framework and tool for analysis (developing theories and conclusions by categorising elements within the body of data) certain themes emerged. These themes were then ordered logically as to provide a gradation of experiences and narrative:

- **On coming out.** This theme often influenced others in that the extent to which each of the participants were open about their sexuality within the workplace had a direct effect on their opinions and perceptions of their experiences within school.
- **On censorship.** Rather than feeling direct discrimination or homophobia at work, some of the respondents indicated that their opinions and sexual expression were being censored within school. This ranged from a feeling that the prevailing heterosexism within the institution was oppressive to limitations being placed on the teacher by Section 28 (either perceptions of censorship or policy from management). On one occasion a member of staff was warned not to out themselves any further, but more common was the issue of self-censorship.

- **On homophobia and discrimination.** Issues with both staff and students were raised here. Many teachers had had comments made by students, although much of this was low level within the school environment. Some teachers had experienced homophobia and discrimination from other members of staff.
- **On gay role models.** Most of those interviewed made comments on this subject, although made caveats to the assumption that out gay role models within the school environment would always be positive. Some had experience of acting as role models to both gay and straight students.
- **On personal triumphs.** Although the institution yielded a higher level of power than the individual, many of those interviewed were able to struggle against prevailing attitudes and homophobic assumptions in some small ways. Some were able to help pupils with emerging same-sex attraction and enjoyed the associated personal triumphs.
- **On teaching and learning.** Respondents mentioned their classroom environment and its inclusivity as important to them. Several linked this to rejection that they had felt or could feel through defining as lesbian and gay, and a desire to make all students feel secure in the environment. Curriculum issues were also mentioned.

The results when seen as a whole, therefore, indicate that the experiences of gay men and lesbians in education are mixed; although some issues remain pertinent

due to a lack of acceptance of difference, positive experiences are to be found. The results are presented in the body of this chapter. Each results section begins with a quote from one of the interviewees as an example of evidence collected.

## On coming out

**HEATHER** And this kid in one class who just randomly in the middle of a lesson turned round and said "Miss you're gay aren't you" and it was a really nice kid who wouldn't normally ask anything untoward or say anything untowards and I just looked at her and said "what a ridiculous sort of question to ask me at this time in the lesson. Think about the appropriateness of what you are asking. Get on." And the kid afterwards had been absolutely mortified and came up and apologised and said, "I'm really sorry I don't know where that came from because I know you've got a boyfriend in the army." - I had no idea where that came from either!

Heather, second in Geography. 16-12-2004

**OLIVER** As soon as I got there I just thought of "fuck it I can't be arsed with all this bollocks" so I just was "Yes I am a big puff, hello" and they were all just "mint, canny, whatever".

Oliver, art teacher. 24-02-2005



## **4.2 On coming out**

### **4.2.1 Introduction**

Weight of numbers leads to a situation where heterosexuality is often presumed. Disclosing same-sex orientation to others or 'coming-out' can often be a difficult personal process with which both adults and young people struggle. Many different pressures lead individuals to be very careful about coming out: personal acceptance of sexuality; fear of rejection from others; fear of discrimination etc. In an educational setting the pressures can be even more complex. The fear of loss of authority in the classroom and bullying from the students could discourage staff from coming out, as could the worry of parental complaints and in particular those from parent-governors. All too often the vestiges of the myth that gay teachers will want to corrupt or even abuse same-sex students still remain unspoken yet present among some members of staff. These are institutional pressures which can have an effect on individual teachers who define as lesbian or gay, and can affect how they act and how far they disclose their sexuality in the school context.

Griffin (1992) offers a structure in which it is possible to place teachers in as far as being out is concerned. It is important to understand how the interviewees manage their own sexual identity in the public arena in order to make sense of

their experiences and how they have interpreted them. This structure is discussed fully in chapter 2 and is relevant to the current discussion.

#### **4.2.2 Interviewees**

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the actions and perceptions of the interviewees an initial classification has been made as to how out they are at school. As Alison states, coming out is a process which never ends, since society assumes heterosexuality as the default state. This quote captures in a concise form, that which was implicitly understood and stated explicitly by each of the participants involved.

**ALISON**        A sort of gradual process really from being about twenty. Coming out to friends and then, it's ongoing, isn't it? You are always coming out. You never stop coming out.

Alison, maths teacher. 8-12-2004

Therefore for the interviewees different situations have led to different levels of disclosure. These include the age of the pupils, relative security of the institution, assumed liberalism of staff, passage of time, the growing self-confidence of the member of staff in their own identity, among others. Nevertheless it is helpful to understand how out the members of staff feel themselves to be, since the experiences and self-perception of a totally closeted teacher will be different to those of a teacher who is totally out to the school community, for example (see

Jonathan (closeted by fear, chapter 4.3.5) and Ruth (out to the whole school community, chapter 4.7.3) and their opinions and experiences).

Evidently, individuals react differently according to situation and context, but some similarities can be seen, and I have classified the respondents as being in one of four categories, similar to those outlined by Griffin (1992) as discussed in chapter 2:

- Happy to be out in the staffroom to friends and some colleagues and happy to be perceived as gay or lesbian, but more careful or distant in the classroom ('implicitly out' according to Griffin). Typically, these teachers have confirmed their sexuality to some friends, and the whole staff are aware of their sexuality, although this is not necessarily confirmed personally. They do not have a problem with pupils seeing them as gay, but are not formally out to the whole student body (section 4.2.2.1)
- Those who believe that sexuality is a personal issue and only disclose their orientation to those considered to be friends, as opposed to colleagues; out to no students ('covering' according to Griffin, section 4.2.2.2).
- Those who experience forced closeting due to fear or perceptions of difficulty, both on staff and with students (similar to 'passing' according to Griffin, section 4.2.2.3).
- Those teachers who are out to the whole school community (Griffin's category of those 'explicitly out', section 4.2.2.4).

Categories are obviously fluid, depending upon the situation and the time at which the experiences recounted took place, but the model remains, nevertheless, a helpful one in as far as drawing meaning from experiences is concerned.

#### **4.2.2.1 Out on staff, more distant in the classroom; 'implicitly out'**

Half of those interviewed (ten interviewees) were either explicitly or implicitly out to other members of staff, yet not surprisingly more secretive in the classroom. Those who were implicitly out to students often found themselves in this situation not through any form of planning, but because they conformed more closely to stereotypes of lesbians and gay men. These interviewees have experiences of supporting pupils where appropriate, and occasionally came out to individual students. These teachers were mostly secure in their sexuality, but were pragmatic about life in the classroom and the difficulty that disclosure could bring to their daily work life. That is to say that the institution and its climate is having an effect on the expression of their sexual identity; heterosexuals do not need to hide their sexuality in the classroom.

Iain indicates that he is out to everybody that he knows well, and is happy to come out to a select few in his new school who have met him and his partner together on social occasions. He does not hide his sexuality, but partly due to

the Catholic nature of the school he is not explicitly out, but is happy for people to assume that he is gay. This is mirrored in the classroom, where in many situations he is happy for the pupils to see him as gay if they want to.

IAIN            But I think that because I don't hide it, I don't talk about girls or I don't you know, I think people assume, but I don't think I'm that camp<sup>13</sup>, well [laughs]... sometimes because I've got a partner it just comes out in conversation you know. But as for the members of staff that I didn't really know that well, I think word just travels 'cos I now know that staff rooms are a hot bed of gossip [laughs].

Iain, NQT in Modern Languages. 26-09-2004

Iain, in indicating that he is not 'that camp' (intonation recorded supports this statement), implicitly recognises that he conforms to a certain extent to the stereotype of a gay man, and understands (and indeed states in interview) that some pupils correctly assume his sexual identity.

Heather's experiences closely mirror those of Iain. She had issues at school due to the way she dressed (in this case, stereotypical short hair cut together with trouser suits), and many people correctly assumed her sexual orientation. However, due to the mild homophobic atmosphere in the staffroom, she only came out formally to close friends; the staff at school assumed she was lesbian and this was confirmed on the school grape-vine.

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<sup>13</sup> See Glossary of specialist vocabulary, p. 10.

In a similar way, Lisa is totally out socially, where she states that 'within friends, family, new acquaintances' she is totally open and everybody is aware of her lesbianism. Lisa is also totally out on staff, and has confirmed her sexuality.

LISA            People I work with within my department are aware of it, it's no big secret outside of that so I guess most of the school probably know about it but it's never been an issue or a note of gossip or anything. Nothing's ever been said but generally totally open about it.

Lisa, English teacher. 4-10-2004

Like Iain, Lisa is happy for pupils to assume that she is gay, although she is not explicitly out.

LISA            I'm not openly out with pupils in the classroom or anything like that; I'm not totally in the closet neither. It's not something that I really hide and I don't say "well, my boyfriend thinks this" or something like this if someone asks me and I am quite open with things at school and I will say "oh well my partner says this" or something and it's become a joke now and again 'cos one kid said to me like well "oh miss how come every teacher in school who you ask always says my partner my partner, is the whole of this school gay? Is that why they all say partner?" And I went well "You'll never know, you'll never know".

Lisa, English teacher. 4-10-2004

Emily has found herself in an interesting situation, in that five out of six teachers in her department are lesbians; Emily is totally out to the staff. Again, she is not out to the students, and makes little reference to this in her interview. Although she does not censor what she says in the classroom, there is an assumption that

she is straight (she does not conform to any lesbian stereotype, see also chapter 4.4 for further discussion here) which she does not attempt to challenge.

Fiona falls into the same category, although she is more secretive with staff at her second school where she has experienced some discrimination (see chapter 4.4); she is assumed to be lesbian by the staff.

FIONA            Oh no, no, only to teachers who were friends. Certainly not to the kids. I don't think that would ever be a very good idea.

Fiona, science teacher. 1-11-2004

Alison is totally out on staff. Indeed, she instructed another gay member of staff to out her so that no assumptions were made. She is happy to be out to staff, but says that she is 'very, very bad at telling people'. She would like to be able to be totally out to the pupils but realises that this could cause difficulty for her in the classroom; this is a pragmatic response to institutional pressure.

ALISON            It is an issue that I have got and, you know, do I ... I mean it's a lot easier for us and I would prefer that I was out in school. I would prefer it. I just think it's really, really hard. I wouldn't feel comfortable being out at school and out to the kids in my school.

Alison, maths teacher. 8-12-2004

Tony had an interesting personal story as he was married for a long time before coming to terms with his own sexuality. He sees his sexuality as an integral part

of his personality and indicates that he would always be out on staff, although like others would be more careful with students. He talks of how he would deal with speaking to the head teacher if he were to change school.

**MICHAEL** [You'd come out] At interview?

**TONY** Yes.

**MICHAEL** Why?

**TONY** Because I am very comfortable with it I see it as a very strong part of what makes me me and it is something that is very important to me. I mean I am not a banner-waver or anything like that, but it is important to me. It is what makes me me and I think that at interview if you are selling yourself to somebody I would ... I want those people to buy or want the whole ...

Tony, head of MFL. 16-06-2005

Several times during his interview Paul mentioned the fact that he did not class himself as a role model because he was not officially out to the pupils, although many had correctly assumed his orientation. He says that when he went into teaching he had decided that if asked by a student about his sexuality he 'wouldn't confirm it, but would never deny it'. For Paul, a personal decision was made before going into the classroom. Although open with staff, Paul also made the decision to establish his reputation as an excellent classroom practitioner before coming out to colleagues. This strategy is similar to that identified by Griffin above. He cites the negative experiences of a peer on PGCE as a reason for this approach.



**PAUL**

When I started I was not out to the staff because when I did my degree there was a lad who started at the same time as everybody else and he came out fairly quickly within a few weeks of starting the course. When I started university I was still questioning my sexuality, I think I probably knew that I was gay but it was taking a while to sort it out. When I went into teaching at I didn't want to be judged in the same way that that lad had been judged on my degree course because he wasn't judged very favourably and he didn't last. He quit within the first two or three months. So I looked at what had happened and I thought was that because people had a label about his sexuality before they had any other label for him, before they knew anything else about him. So when I started my job I wanted to be known as a person, I wanted to build up a professional reputation before I felt that people had anything that they might use against me in a negative way.

Paul, second in VI form. 2-4-2005

Julie developed her self confidence over her career in as far as being out to staff is concerned. In her third school she befriended another lesbian teacher, and it became clear to the staff as a whole that Julie too was lesbian. Again, she is not out to pupils.

Chris's perspective mirrors that of many of the respondents. They are out to some of the staff because they are building relationships. They are not out to the pupils because there is no need to be in as far as teaching, learning and classroom practice is concerned.

**CHRIS**

I think, as well, how can I put it? My sexuality is part of my identity, it is not my identity. Whilst, yes I am a gay teacher, as far as I am concerned that's my relationship side, it's not a ... it doesn't impede on my classroom practice.

Chris, deputy head. 10-04-2005

Indeed this approach (one where in a professional teacher-pupil relationship no need to discuss sexual orientation is to be found) was followed by half of those interviewed, who did not see the need to come out to the pupils for reasons of emancipation or for a complete openness about their sexuality to play any role within the classroom.

#### **4.2.2.2 Sexuality is personal**

Some interviewees believed sexuality to be a totally personal issue. Their values effect how many staff they are open with (typically only staff they class as friends rather than colleagues), and this certainly has an influence on their demeanour in the classroom. The following interviewees do not feel the need to champion the 'gay cause' and do not see their sexuality as having a direct influence in the classroom.

Joan expresses a more guarded approach towards her sexuality, in that she is open about her sexuality with people she works with whom she classes as friends. However, for her, sexuality is a completely personal issue, and she would never see the need to come out or confirm her sexuality to students.

**JOAN** I honestly cannot see why being gay should be relevant to a teacher. I don't think it should be relevant. And like I said before you don't say are you

heterosexual and somebody doesn't have to stand up and say they are so I don't think that you have to come out, no.

Joan, special needs. 12-01-2005

Mark's opinion closely mirrors that of Joan in as far as confirming sexual orientation is concerned. He never discusses his private life at work, and does not feel the need to be in any way political about his sexuality. (Although secretive and unwilling for others to know details of his private life, some teachers have made correct assumptions, see chapter 4.4.3.2.)

**MICHAEL** And so at work, are you out to mates at work?

**MARK** No. I don't discuss my private life at work at all.... I suppose on balance I am not someone who feels a need, as I have already said, to champion the gay cause

Mark, SENCO. 4-04-2005

Similarly, Morgan has not come out to many people, either personally or professionally. He sees himself as a more private person who does not 'advertise [his] sexuality'.

Joan, Morgan and Mark were all encouraged to take part in the project as a personal favour. All three indicated that they would not have otherwise volunteered for such an interview. Their responses to questions are interesting when seen in this light; due to their opinions on their own sexuality they may not have participated otherwise (see also chapter 3).

#### **4.2.2.3 Closeted by fear or perception of difficulty.**

Three interviewees remained closeted or secretive at work due to perceived fear or difficulties should they disclose their sexuality. Jonathan who has taught for 40 years in a deprived catchment area was out to no-one and passed as heterosexual by fabricating the story of a love interest when at university.

**JONATHAN** I had a story for that which was invented. I used to say, in fact I was very friendly with a girl when I was at university, not sexually but we got on quite well and I used to say "well oh yes, I used to have a girlfriend years ago but she was killed in a car accident and I've never sort of got round to liking anybody since". So I invented a story that hopefully sort of got me off the hook. Which alright, it was a lie but whatever you are going to say is going to be a lie basically.

Jonathan, deputy head. 10-10-2004

Jonathan was convinced that coming out as a deputy head would have ended his career.

**JONATHAN** But I was very conscious that any kind of coming out as gay as a senior, a member of a senior management team, I held a senior post for a long time, would have crucified me. No I didn't feel I could trust anybody with knowing and I wasn't so sure either in that because I was a senior deputy if I admitted I was gay that I would still retain the support of all the staff....I think that if the cat had got out the bag it would have spread somehow. And once it had reached the parents we would have had all hell let loose, I'm quite sure. Our part of the area in those days felt very homophobic

Simon is a private person in many ways, and believes that sexuality is a personal issue. However, as head teacher he also experiences some pressure to remain closeted, as being out may cause him difficulties; he feels he is pragmatic about the possible consequences of coming out. This, in addition to his more private persona, has led to him not being out at all on staff, although he thinks that some of members of staff may be aware of his situation, or at least correctly assume his sexuality. He says of being head teacher:

**SIMON** I'm probably more paranoid about it than I should be but I think in part it's to do with my sexuality but in greater part it's to do with the fact that I'm a very public persona, you know this is a small, it's a city but it's actually a small town; I'm well known, if I walk round town now then I'll either get spoken to... you know I employ 176 people so in a city of 40 – 50,000 that's actually a reasonable proportion so you're constantly meeting people, you constantly have... I've got 1500 kids so in theory 3,000 parents, more like 4 or 5,000... there's an awful lot of people out there who will stop me and say hello or well you'll walk past them and go that's so and so or whatever, and I don't like that. And that's not to do with my sexuality. I like being a private person, I like having a private life and that's the biggest difficulty that I've found in working in this school

Simon, head teacher. 15-01-2005

However, as head teacher he remains distant and secretive to a certain extent, so as not to compromise his professionalism.

**SIMON** Because I've never been in that situation, I never have too much to drink in front of my staff because if the next morning, or the next week I've got to bollock them because they've not been setting homework or they've said something inappropriate to a kid, it's too hard. It makes the job too hard to do.

Simon, head teacher. 15-01-2005

James is out to two colleagues who he classes as friends on staff, but remains worried about possible consequences if he were to come out to the wider staff, and would under no circumstances come out to students. He is in a particularly difficult position however, in that his predecessor was suspended and dismissed for inappropriate same-sex relations with a student.

#### **4.2.2.4 Out to the whole school community**

Four of those interviewed are to all intents and purposes out to the whole school community, including the student population. Ruth, for example, is totally out to the whole school community. She conforms to the lesbian stereotype in her demeanour and in the way she dresses. She has confirmed her sexuality to the staff through discussions and humorous Christmas cards, and she is well known in her local community and in the gay community as a singer in a lesbian band.

**RUTH** Yes. I naturally assume that people know I am a lesbian. I didn't actually get up on a soap box

**MICHAEL** Is this at work, you mean?

**RUTH** Yes, but I mean, for example, I ... instead of sending everybody Christmas cards we always just put some money in the charity box and pin a sort of Christmas card on the staff ... and mine was signed from 'the only gay in the village' because it is like a standing joke that I can't find any other gay teachers at the school, because there aren't any. Which I find ludicrous!

I don't have a problem with out. I have been out since I was ...you know, I am

45, been out since I was about 18 and there isn't anybody that ... my family knew about it ... you could print Ruth Collins is a dyke on the front page of the *Evening Chronicle* and nobody would go 'ooh, never', 'really'

Ruth, second in History. 18-03-2005

In her interview she does indicate, however, that she positively chose to work in a school which was known for its more liberal views, and accepting attitudes. Howard used to teach at the same school, and was also able to be completely out on staff, and on occasions was able to challenge homophobic attitudes during his daily work (see chapter 4.6).

Peter has never disguised his sexuality at school. Over the course of his career he has always been completely open with both staff and pupils alike. This has caused him some problems (see chapter 4.4). In one situation, Peter, when being pressed about his private life confronted the issue head on.

**PETER** They'd been kind of asking me all sorts of questions about my personal life, nothing direct and then one day one of my year 11s asked me did I have a girlfriend, just before class had started and I thought right, good opportunity, 'no I don't have a girlfriend, I think what you're trying to ask is am I gay, yes I am'.

Peter, ICT teacher. 25-04-2005

Oliver has had experience of being out to the whole school community, although used to be careful about how the process happens; he has always been open with the staff. In his first school he was out to the pupils near the end of his time

there, and gained in confidence to be open, at least in the context of sixth formers, at school.

**OLIVER** As soon as I got there I just thought of "fuck it I can't be arsed with all this bollocks so I just was "Yes I am a big puff, Hello" and they were all just mint, canny, whatever.

Oliver, art teacher. 24-02-2005

Once again, it is worth noting that the people questioned come from only certain sections of the gay teaching community. There will have been many possible interviewees who saw the flyers and publicity but decided not to contact. It can only be assumed that they did so for a variety of reasons. However, as mentioned above, some possible contacts presumably felt unable to take part for fear of their sexuality being disclosed and because they were less comfortable with their sexuality themselves. These people may hide experiences which could have illuminated aspects of the project.

### **4.2.3 Critical Discussion**

How out a teacher is to themselves, their peers and their students correlates to their opinions and experiences of homosexuality. Most of those interviewed were out; at least partially to staff at school, and all felt able to participate in this project. Their experiences of personal triumph, homophobia etc. are coloured by the level of personal acceptance of their own sexuality and their own



understanding of how to integrate sexuality into daily life. It is interesting to note that the grey area between being totally closeted and totally out is where many of the stories are located.

Staff who did not feel able to be out to anyone except for close friends had very different perspectives and stories to the majority of respondents. These are fewer in number due to the nature of disclosure. Indeed, the level of disclosure of many of those interviewed was often regulated by the institution; many of those interviewed would be out to the whole school population if this were a safe stance to take.

Although the model put forward by Griffin (1992) is helpful as an initial framework, it could also be seen deficient when describing the complexities of disclosure of sexuality. It does not allow for differences in level of disclosure depending upon age and length of time the person has accepted their own sexual identity. It does not allow for changes in level of disclosure when changing work place. In particular, there is no difference in category or continuum between level of disclosure to the student body and teaching staff.

In addition the model does not allow for the difference in rate of disclosure to those of the same sexuality. Many of the respondents who were 'out to staff but more distant in the classroom' disclosed their sexuality explicitly (or all but disclosed their sexuality) to gay or lesbian students in an attempt to support

them. Here, a small number of pupils will have been aware of the teacher's sexual orientation, in situations where it would have been highly unlikely that the pupils would have shared this information with their peers for fear of them outing themselves (see chapters 4.5 and 4.6). The model makes no provision for degrees of disclosure, nor groups to which disclosure is made (whole school, gay male students, lesbian students they have seen on the scene etc.).

Fraynd and Capper (2003), when interviewing school leaders about their sexuality, cite Griffin's four protection strategies used by teachers to support them if their sexuality were to be disclosed (chapter 2.4.6). In a similar way, teachers in this study (Paul, Simon and James) have sought to develop a reputation as excellent teachers or leaders in order to protect themselves when they disclose their sexuality, or if they were to be outed. For those in the study who were concerned about revealing their sexuality, regulation of action and demeanour, and separation of school and home life were also in evidence. This supports the work and conclusions of Griffin (1992) and Fraynd and Capper (2003).

The level of disclosure to the staff was high. Fourteen of the twenty teachers interviewed were out to the teaching body at their school; only three were closeted due to fear or perceptions of difficulty. Although this is not a representative sample, this would indicate a certain level of acceptance among professionals, even if on occasion some difficulties were met (see chapter 4.4).

The level of worry and fear as expressed by interviewees in other projects (Epstein 1997, Ferfolja 2005, Clarke 1998) was not replicated by most of the interviewees here, although consideration was often given as to when to come out and who to come out to, mirroring Squires and Sparkes' assertion that 'although many teachers do not experience homophobia, the anticipation of such [can cause] considerable anxiety' (1996: 83).

## On Censorship

MICHAEL Right. Section 28 - Has it ever affected you?

CHRIS Yes, sort of.

MICHAEL Sort of?

CHRIS Yes. Because I still .... I know this is Section 28 but what did it mean in actual fact? ... Can I get .... I suppose it is lack of understanding. I don't know what .... Yes, I just don't know what it meant.

MICHAEL So you just ignored the thing.

CHRIS Yes. Right. But that's me if I don't like something I just ignore it.

Chris, deputy head. 10-04-2005

## **4.3 On censorship**

### **4.3.1 Introduction**

Many of the teachers in the study have experienced forms of censorship during their careers. Here censorship is used to mean attempts to limit or regulate behaviour or self-expression. This censorship sometimes comes from wider society and institutions larger than school, sometimes from within the structure and management of the school, and sometimes from the teacher themselves:

- Government and society can put pressure on the school and its teachers in the way they deal with homosexuality
- The school itself can put pressure on individual teachers to remain quiet either about their own sexuality or not to talk about issues of sexuality with the students
- Teachers themselves, fearing what may occur, often censor their own actions and conversations with students. This form of self censorship is common to many of the teachers in the study.

When issues of censorship were mentioned by the interviewees, the following themes emerged: issues linked to heterosexism; Section 28 and its effect on pastoral issues and teaching and learning; an encouragement to limit disclosure and self-censorship.

### 4.3.2 Heterosexism

Heterosexism is the prejudice that exists in society that stems from the fact that more people are heterosexual, and therefore this is the assumed status. This underlying assumption means that gay men and lesbians need to 'come out' or break out of the mould that society forces on them. Heterosexism (and heteronormativity<sup>14</sup>) has led to an underlying 'meta-narrative' which assumes that people date, get married, have children (in that order, historically). These, and other, unwritten rules about behaviour, exert pressure on gay men and lesbians in the classroom.

There is consensus among the respondents of the need to be careful about disclosing sexual identity to colleagues and in the classroom. Although many of the interviewees were out to some extent on staff and occasionally to the students, all were aware of the potential difficulties this can cause. It seems that teachers in leadership are often aware of these potential difficulties, and often prefer gay and lesbian staff to be discrete about their sexual identity.

Peter feels that school leaders are fearful of lesbian and gay teachers who are completely out, and prefer their staff to be subtle. Being totally out is often seen as political, in a way that being confident in one's heterosexuality is not. Society

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<sup>14</sup> Heteronormativity is the understanding that statistically more people define as heterosexual and prescribe to the norms understood therein. It is value-neutral, as opposed to heterosexism, but both concepts place pressure on gay men and lesbians as the minority, either statistically or behaviourally.

still has an expectation that gay men and lesbians should be less open about themselves than straight men and women; the 'as long as they are not in your face' mentality.

PETER            There were other lesbian and gay teachers; basically, over the last ten years I've discovered that it's ok to be gay as long as you're quiet about it.

MICHAEL        In a school?

PETER            In a school yeah.

MICHAEL        And what would you consider being loud about it? Telling the kids?

PETER            Telling the kids and being at all political. If you're at all political you scare management.

Peter, ICT teacher. 25-04-2005

At Alison's school there is another gay teacher. He is very open about his sexuality and his lifestyle, and his lack of discretion is beginning to cause problems.

ALISON            Oh he [Jon] is completely out and he comes into the staff room after a weekend or after a week's holiday and 'did you have a good holiday' and he'll go 'yes I was shagged all over in Manchester, it was great!' ... I'd said did you have a good time Christmas and New Year and he said 'yes, for the first year I shagged the New Year in with some random and went back to a house party and popped two Es'. And I was like what? So he is completely and utterly like outrageous sometimes with it ...

Alison, maths teacher. 8-12-2004

Although eyebrows may have been raised if a straight member of staff had talked in such a way, Alison assumes that management would deal positively with

Alison's quieter, more 'appropriate' lesbianism, and struggle with many aspects of Jon's approach. When asked about being out to some of the students she indicates that management would support her, but find Jon's situation more difficult to manage. Alison assumes that when Jon expresses his homosexuality in the context of his promiscuity it makes supporting him even more difficult; two complex moral issues are more difficult to defend to parents and governors than one. The issue here could be his sexuality, his promiscuity, his openness about sexual experience or a combination of factors.

ALISON            How would management react to that? I think that the ... I think they would probably be kind of alright with it in terms of me, but I think they would be quite upset with him ...

Alison, maths teacher. 8-12-2004

The assumption that everyone is heterosexual is a pressure that gay staff deal with on a daily basis. This heterosexism is engrained in society and very difficult to combat. Certainly, being very open about sexuality at all times can be seen as threatening by the heterosexual majority. Thus, many gay men and lesbians are not open about their sexuality at all times; this is a luxury that heterosexuals have, being in the majority.

Julie notes that pupils in school assume that all of their teachers are married and therefore heterosexual in the first instance. In her opinion, therefore, the older



stereotype of single female spinsters in the classroom is no longer prevalent among students.

**JULIE** In fact I find that ... I think a lot of women teachers ... we all tend to get called Mrs. .... Although I always introduce myself to classes as Miss McNeil, I prefer to be Ms but Ms McNeil is such a ridiculous mouthful that I go with Miss, so I've always clearly identified as Miss McNeil. But they don't listen to that and they still call you Mrs McNeil the whole time and because I am, you know, I've looked a bit older, or have done more recently and my hair started to go grey when I was in my twenties, I think they just assume that I am married and I think that with women colleagues above a certain age that's always seems to be assumed. So they always call you Mrs even though you are not Mrs and you have never told them you are Mrs.

Julie, head of German. 11-05-2005

The acceptance of heterosexuality as the norm does put pressure on gay and lesbian teachers. Julie also comments on the fact that other staff often talk about their spouse and children in the classroom, either as a way of building relationships with the class or when giving examples when teaching. Due to the difficulties that may arise in being out with the pupils, and the fact that management often prefer gay and lesbian staff to be more subtle, this denies them the ability to make these closer bonds with pupils; and these closer bonds are often useful for classroom management and relationship building. She notes of her straight colleagues:

**JULIE** I do feel that pressure, yes. I definitely used to notice through listening in on colleagues' lessons and hearing through doors and walls and things, I

certainly noticed how much some of them did endlessly talk about their married partners and their children, what they'd done over the weekend and so on.

Julie, head of German. 11-05-2005 .

Julie, as a experienced practitioner, whose expertise led her to both the position of text book author and PGCE lecturer, used other topics of conversation for relationship building. She still laments the fact that she did not enjoy as close a relationship with the classes as some of her colleagues, however.

**JULIE** I think I probably end up with fewer links with my classes and probably didn't enjoy quite such a close relationship with them because I didn't share as much of my home life. That is probably true. Although you can share other things. I would make sure we had other little jokey things going on or, you know, a certain terrible taste in music I had that they thought was hilarious or a complete lack of knowledge about football or, you know, whatever it is. I guess I would try and compensate for the fact that I didn't particularly want to share details of my home life by finding other ways of making links with them.

Julie, head of German. 11-05-2005

Alison highlights an additional area which she feels is an example of heterosexism at work. She reports that she would find it difficult to put pictures of her and her girlfriend in the office due to inequalities in the system, whereas straight colleagues often implicitly advertise their heterosexuality with pictures of their spouse and children.

**ALISON** It does bother me actually that in the office that I work in there's two ... there's an assistant head who has her workspace. And then the head of department who's got her workspace and a few chairs and the assistant head has got pictures of her son on her wall and pictures ... And her department has got pictures of her kids on the filing cabinet. I don't think she has a picture of husband, I don't think she gets on with him that well, so every time you go to the filing cabinet there's a picture of this four year old staring out at you ... someone else's kid ... much as I do like and respect my head of department I don't really want to look at her kids all day and I think that there's an expectation that, for me, if you live in a slightly out of the ordinary life ... you know, and I don't want to kind of isolate myself as different therefore you kind of live with it ...

Alison, maths teacher. 8-12-2004

An understanding of the difficulties related to heterosexism was commonplace among the respondents. Chris, however, uses heterosexism to his advantage when dealing with difficult parents. Chris has a photo of his niece and nephew on his desk. Parents tend to assume that Chris has children because of this photo, and do not attack his judgement as a teacher. Here the assumption of the parents is that teachers with children have a deeper understanding of their needs than teachers without children.

**CHRIS** I've got a photo on my desk that has two children, it's got my niece and my nephew on.... There is a reason I have got it on my desk, it is not because I want people to automatically think I am ... no I will rephrase that. It is not because I want students to think that I am heterosexual. These children mean the world, they are like my son and daughter and I love them to bits. However, in my job I deal with a lot of pastoral problems and the first thing that parents in my current school, and in my old school, they used to come and shout and bawl 'have you got kids, if you had got kids you would know

what it's like! OK. That photo on there stops that, since it has been there I have never had that so it reduces the argument or the conflict.

Chris, deputy head. 10-04-2005

### **4.3.3 Section 28**

Section 28 was a controversial amendment to the United Kingdom's 1988 Local Government Act, enacted on 24 May 1988 and repealed on 18 November 2003. The amendment stated that a local authority 'shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality' or 'promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship'. Many people believed that Section 28 prohibited local councils from distributing any material, whether plays, leaflets, books, etc. that portrayed gay relationships as anything other than abnormal. Teachers and educational staff in some cases were afraid of discussing gay issues with students for fear of losing state funding. Section 28 has been repealed, although the respondents here either refer to the situation before repeal, or indeed the lasting confusion that exists surrounding addressing homosexuality within schools.

Section 28 had the greatest effect on censoring teachers in as far as homosexuality is concerned. Individual schools and individual teachers interpreted the 'promotion' of homosexuality in different ways. Some schools and

teachers assumed that this meant that homosexuality was not to be mentioned at all. Others felt able to talk about the dangers of homophobia and prejudice, and some felt able to give advice to students when requested. It is evident, however, that Section 28 did have an impact on teachers, schools and classroom practice.

Jonathan remembers how many schools interpreted Section 28 at the beginning.

JONATHAN Yes it was regarded for the authority not to promote homosexuality but effectively both parents and staff regarded it as "You will not be discussing homosexuality in this school".

Jonathan, deputy head. 10-10-2004

#### **4.3.3.1 Section 28 – Effect on Pastoral Support**

Heather was able to comfort one of the girls she taught when she asked if Heather thought there was anything wrong with being gay.

HEATHER And I just said "no, not at all." And she said "Oh well, I think I might be". OK. We had a chat about it and she was after advice really as to who to get in touch with and what to do and how to go about it.

Heather, second in Geography. 16-12-2004

However, the girl in question then talked to her tutor about her issues. The tutor, not knowing what to do, sought advice from her pastoral line manager. Heather had experienced hostility from this teacher due to what she believed to be

homophobic attitudes. A combination of fear of Section 28, hostility and panic led to an inappropriately excessive response; where the student needed support, advice and encouragement she ended up with an appointment with the psychologist and being outed to her mother. In this way, the fear and confusion that Section 28 brought had an effect on the way teachers responded to this young lesbian student. Teachers, worried about what they were allowed to say (in effect how far they were being censored), failed this student, according to Heather.

HEATHER Um, certainly because it later turned out that another member of staff had spoken to the same student, under slightly different circumstances, she was actually her tutor. After speaking to me she had gone to speak with her. She'd not known what to say and not known how to deal with it so she'd taken it to her line manager and says "this child has come out to me, what should we do? Or what do I do as a tutor?" And unfortunately it was our aforementioned homophobic teacher which was why I'd not mentioned it to her and she sent it to a, set up an interview for her, an appointment with a psychologist. Now obviously the child was furious. She was absolutely livid at this because she was supposed to have her mother present with her at this meeting because she was under 16. It all got very horrible so I wrote to my union for advice and I really didn't know how to deal with it. I think that does come back to section 28 because no-one really knew how to handle it, or what they could do. People kept on passing it on upwards.

MICHAEL This girl was directly affected by section 28?

HEATHER Umm, Yeah. I mean I'd given her the best advice that I could to have passed on Lesbian Line numbers and things like that. Because I had access to those resources but as a teacher I had absolutely no idea what to do with her at all.

Heather, second in Geography. 16-12-2004

Paul experienced a more direct form of censorship in his pastoral work with sixth formers. Paul worked in an inner-city comprehensive, although the head teacher was very overt in his Christian values. This exhibited itself in various ways, one being the importance placed on the daily act of worship as required in English schools. Paul reported that he held homophobic views, and in Paul's view this was evidenced when the head tore down a pastoral display in the sixth form area which supported students who were unsure of their sexuality. Paul mentions the way in which Section 28 either allowed the head to act in a certain way, or justified his actions.

PAUL            So we were in school having department time and so on and I spent some time in the sixth form centre refurbishing it, or helping out doing displays and that sort of thing, and I was very keen that we should have a self help display for the students there and I had been up to health promotions up at the hospital and I had been and I had collected a variety of materials about drug abuse, about sexual awareness for a very clear display about where the kids could go if they needed support in terms of clinics, and so on. I had also put up some information on displays I had got from MESMAC [North-east support service for gay men] regarding help for people uncertain of their sexuality. I was quite pleased with my display. I came in on the Monday morning and discovered that part of it was ripped. It was part where the information relating to different sexualities had been. The head had had a meeting with some governors in there over the weekend. Apparently he had been incensed enough by this material, which he felt was promoting homosexuality under Section 28 that he had taken it down. He had even phoned the head of sixth form at home over the weekend to tell him how terrible this was and what he'd had to do.

Paul, second in VI form. 2-4-2005

The justification that the head gave for this was his interpretation of Section 28 and what promotion of homosexuality actually is.

Fiona currently teaches in a single-sex school. When asked about Section 28 and related issues, she mentioned a one-hour session led by the head teacher each year, which forms part of the core PSE curriculum. He deals with homosexuality in his talk on sexual deviancy; the existence of this lesson obviously censors staff and students from talking about homosexuality in positive terms. The content of the session indicates that any pastoral support for gay and lesbian students would aim to stop their deviancy, and move to a more appropriate non-homosexual orientation.

FIONA Because at the moment what the PSE curriculum consists mainly of is RE [Religious Education] and then the headmaster gives a talk on sexual deviancy to year 11. That's actually what it is called. In that comes some sexuality.

MICHAEL So that is the only experience they get ... And his sexual deviancy talk says?

FIONA I think it is about being gay and stuff like that. From what I have heard other people say. It is actually called sexual deviancy, I can't believe that is ... it should be illegal. I am sure it is illegal. [laughs]

MICHAEL So, in actual fact, that's it then, gay issues have one hour in the whole school curriculum

FIONA And year 11 is far too late

MICHAEL and it's called sexual deviancy.

FIONA Far too late in year 11.

Fiona, science teacher. 1-11-2004



Some of the respondents did continue to give advice and support over the time that Section 28 was in place. This is often due to their own personal interest and knowledge of the Act. Other respondents who have shown less of a personal interest in gay issues in education ignored the law as they never sought any input into either the curriculum or pastoral support in as far as homosexuality is concerned.

Howard, having researched into Section 28 at the time, felt more than comfortable talking about sexuality when advice was sought pastorally.

HOWARD I mean I have done a lot of reading about it and I knew fine it had nothing to do with teachers it was to do locally a law with local education authorities and did not prevent a teacher doing anything.... If I thought I could give some advice to somebody I would have done. And I did do. Yes. That's what I said earlier. There was at least two occasions when I did say something to somebody or given encouraging hands.

Howard, assistant head. 16-01-2005

However, other straight colleagues who knew less about Section 28 thought that talking about the subject was completely forbidden, and were worried even to deal with homophobic bullying.

HOWARD I think some thought they shouldn't. .. If there were homophobic comments they would try and avoid having to deal with it.

Howard, assistant head. 16-01-2005

Peter was able to deflect criticism of any pastoral support which he gave because he had also researched into Section 28 at the time.

**PETER**            Yeah, I ... I can't remember exactly what I asked....and the head of key stage four said "what about section 28?" and I quoted verbatim circular 12/99 or whatever it was... I could quote it at the time, and that scared him. He was like this guy knows what he's talking about I can't bullshit him and he shut up.

Peter, ICT teacher. 25-04-2005

On the other hand, Mark does not feel that Section 28 had any effect on his career whatsoever. Thus the respondents who were closeted or more private about their sexuality experienced less censorship, as would be expected.

**MARK**            I forgot all about section 28; didn't affect me. ....I suppose on balance I am not someone who feels a need, as I have already said, to champion the gay cause.

Mark, SENCO. 4-04-2005

#### **4.3.3.2            Section 28 – Effect on Teaching and Learning**

Section 28 had a direct effect on classroom practice as well as on a pastoral level. A head of year reportedly tried to stop Lisa covering issues concerning sexuality and HIV/AIDS in her English lessons. She was teaching a text to year eight, which although primarily about bereavement and prejudice involves a

young boy who comes into contact with a gay man and his partner. The partner is dying of HIV/AIDS in hospital, and the gay man suffers a violent homophobic attack. These issues form part of the plot, but many forms of prejudice are touched on in the story. The Head of Year Eight expressed her anger and used a phone call from a parent to give weight to her argument. Lisa rang the parent directly to discover that the complaint was about something totally different.

LISA        The first time I taught it I had a head of year come to see me and have a word with me about the issues we were dealing with and obviously I was appalled at what was being said and she'd said she'd had a complaint from parents and what I'd done with the novel was totally inappropriate..... I was a bit worried about that but I rang the parent. And that wasn't the issue at all, when I said "oh look this is what we're doing, this is why they did this, this is what they did, this is what their presentation was" she said "oh actually that really wasn't my complaint. My complaint was..." And it was about a student teacher that they had at the time and the girl didn't like the student teacher.

Lisa, English teacher. 4-10-2004

When Lisa confronted the Head of Year, she confirmed that it was her problem rather than that of a parent. Here the Head of Year tried to use her authority over Lisa to censor what she was teaching. She also brought up Section 28 in an attempt to defend herself.

LISA        And the Head of Year said "oh well actually yeah I suppose that was her main complaint but I was just a bit appalled 'cos I've got a daughter the same age and I wouldn't want her looking at those issues."

It was thrown at me at the conversation that I had before about the situation

where I had a parent ringing in and that was kind of brought up as an issue of maybe this was going against section 28.

Lisa, English teacher. 4-10-2004

The greatest effect that Section 28 has had on teaching and learning is in the area of sex education. Schools took different stances on Section 28 and its application in the classroom, as mentioned above. Most of the staff interviewed had little experience of sex education in their school. None were PSE specialists and only one had direct experience of teaching it. It is also interesting to note that only four of those questioned had ever read the sex education policy (see chapter 4.7).

Oliver reported strict parameters around what was off limits in sex education at his school.

**MICHAEL** Has section 28 ever had an effect on your classroom practice?

**OLIVER** Only when it came to that sex education side of things that I had to do, and I was thinking I really should be telling the kids here and I can't because I'm being told that I'm not allowed to.... Section 28 was never technically mentioned at any point. We were just told we can't discuss homosexuality or oral sex or anything like that, we only discuss the basic vaginal sex between heterosexuals and what can go wrong in terms of STDs (sexually transmitted diseases) and contraception and stuff.

**MICHAEL** Do you think that was Section 28, the reason for that was Section 28 or because as you said all staff had to teach it and all staff weren't happy teaching it?

**OLIVER** I don't know, I think it was probably both.

Oliver, art teacher. 24-02-2005

On the other hand, Ruth had faith that the teachers on the sex education carousel would have dealt with any issues with integrity and with the well-being of the students at heart. When asked whether gay sex was part of sex education, she felt that any questions would be dealt with, and that Section 28 did not limit discussions.

RUTH            I think so, yes. I think most of the people I know who teach it are pretty OK people and I don't think, you know, they wouldn't be doing ... "Personally speaking, I'm not homosexual, but I've heard that" ...

Ruth, second in History. 18-03-2005

#### **4.3.4 Forcing staff back into the closet**

Iain currently works in a faith school. Rumours have started about Iain among staff; he has disclosed his sexuality to some of his friends in that they have met his partner and socialised with them. One member of senior management is reported to have spoken to Iain's close friend on staff, assuming that such inquiries would be reported back to Iain. The teacher gave a subtle warning not to come out any further, as it would be an issue for a 'lot of teachers in the school'.

IAIN            Well one member of staff who is a senior member of staff, approached

somebody who I know and said "is he gay?" and this girl who knows that I am, said "I'm not sure. Why? Would that be a problem?" and this senior teacher said it wouldn't be a problem for me I'm not bothered but it would be for a lot of teachers in the school..... But the majority of them I've been told it could be risky to tell them because it could cause problems.

Iain, NQT in Modern Languages. 26-09-2004

Although this could be seen as friendly advice from management, keeping Iain closeted would cause Iain fewer problems in his career, but would certainly cause management fewer headaches in dealing with what is currently a thorny issue in faith schools at the moment. Whatever the motive, the warning is an attempt to censor Iain's conversations and actions.

#### **4.3.5 Self censorship**

Most of those interviewed were careful about who they confirmed their sexuality to (see chapter 4.2). Indeed, this is a form of self-censorship. Jonathan, being the oldest teacher interviewed, remembers how he needed to be extremely careful.

**JONATHAN** Oh yes. But I was very conscious that any kind of coming out as gay as a senior, a member of a senior management team, I held a senior post for a long time, would have crucified me.

Jonathan, deputy head. 10-10-2004

However, another form of self censorship exists among gay and lesbian teachers; the schools that they apply to work in. Several of the interviewees indicated that the number of schools that they were able to apply for jobs in was limited due to their sexuality. Those questioned self selected schools, either knowing the attitude of the head teacher (whose influence in a school is extremely strong), or knowing the difficulties facing schools as institutions, including those which are faith schools or private schools. Staff often researched the position or opinions of the head in such schools before applying.

Even Ruth, totally out in the classroom, found that she looked for schools in which to work which would be more accepting of her lesbianism.

RUTH I thought I would be comfortable in this staff room and I did go for a couple of, sort of, look arounds other schools and I thought I would be very uncomfortable as a lesbian in this staff room. I have been in a couple of schools and thought, no, I didn't feel very comfortable about that.

Ruth, second in History. 18-03-2005

Simon and Chris are both on senior management. Both have thought about which schools they applied to because of their sexuality, and therefore have had their options narrowed. Both comment on the fact that some posts seem to require a married couple rather than single man or same-sex couple.

When asked whether he felt that he had been discriminated against during his career because of his sexuality Simon says:

**SIMON** No. No, I don't. Only to the extent that I self selected, and where I felt the school, if I felt that a school would have required someone who was married and you know, had a high profile wife then I wouldn't have gone for that job. So for instance a school that's got a boarding section or a school with a strong denominational characteristic or a grammar school or something, it's not me. ... so my style of headship would never have suited the type of school where that type of discrimination might come about. So I suppose in a sense I discriminated myself.

Simon, head teacher. 15-01-2005

Chris, who is looking for headship felt that his sexuality would not be a hindrance to him. However, he feels that in more public roles in the Local Authority his sexuality may create a glass ceiling for his career.

**CHRIS** I don't think the gay thing would come into being a head but I think if you were to go any further than head

**MICHAEL** Further than headship?

**CHRIS** Yes.

**MICHAEL** Into the authority?

**CHRIS** Yes. If you were to go and work on national level then your sexuality would be an issue

Chris, deputy head. 10-04-2005

These comments mirror those made by some of the key informants in the DfES report *Homophobia, sexual orientation and schools: a review and implications for action* (Warwick et al 2004) where specific issues mentioned included the fact



that gay teachers only tend to apply to gay friendly schools and 'tended to stay there rather than thinking of moving on once they find a 'safe' school in which to work' (2004: 21).

#### **4.3.6 Critical discussion**

In a similar way to experiences reported by Clarke (1998) and Squires and Sparkes (1996), interviewees indicated that they, as gay staff, censor themselves in as far as coming out is concerned, and also in respect of posts for which they apply. This is also mentioned by key respondents in Warwick et al (2004). This study supports the conclusions made by these researchers.

A certain amount of self-censorship was also reported having a direct effect on classroom practice and pastoral support because of different understandings and interpretation of Section 28. Indeed, the opinions and actions of the staff were worthy of comment due to their breadth; some acted very carefully for fear of what pressure Section 28 could put them under, others ignored it. Even the reported actions of management lead to a confused picture. This would support Epstein (2000) and Moran (2001) in their conclusions underlining the misunderstanding and confusion that existed in schools due to Section 28, and that continues to exist to a certain extent after its repeal. Respondents in this study highlighted not only the effect of Section 28 on themselves as practitioners,

but also on the effects on the pupils; pastoral support and teaching and learning were effected in some cases, according to the interviewees.

The more subtle form of censorship, that of heterosexism, is largely absent from the literature. Nixon and Givens (2004) is one of the exceptions here, making reference to assumptions by college tutors as to ITE students' heterosexuality. Respondents in this study reported that the prevailing heterosexual model in society causes them difficulty; so does the constant need to come out and the constant state of challenging heteronormative models in the workplace. In schools where teachers feel supported and perceive themselves to have experienced no direct discrimination, this subtle issue may still be present. More research would be useful around this aspect of censorship within educational institutions.

## On homophobia and discrimination

RUTH

Oh, I do remember one story, one brief, brief story. Once I was walking across the yard on the other site and I was coming from my car park at school and I had to walk through this sort of open area and I heard this comment from a girl, and I don't know who it was, and she said Miss, what do lesbians do in bed? And I just carried on walking and I went 'sleep, eat toast, watch the telly, chat' as I disappeared into the school.

Ruth, second in History. 18-03-2005

## **4.4 On homophobia and discrimination**

### **4.4.1 Introduction**

Although many of the respondents had positive experiences to report, there remained some subtle discrimination from staff, and some abuse from students at school. This was more pronounced for some teachers than others, and had a greater effect on some than others. It is important to note that several respondents when asked directly if they had experienced discrimination stated that they had no negative experiences to recount. Similarly, we can surmise that some of those teachers approached who refused to participate in the project did so due to a perceived negative reaction if they were to be outed in some way, although others will have refused due to lack of interest. It is also important to underline that most of the participants here are highlighting individual instances across a career; the majority of those questioned continued their daily lives as teachers without reference to their sexuality.

### **4.4.2 Issues with students**

#### **4.4.2.1 Perceived sexuality – abuse from students (barely audible)**

Several of the respondents had experienced verbal abuse from the students. Although mostly low level, this form of discrimination was not uncommon. Many

of the examples given were situations where pupils were unable to be identified, for example, in crowded corridors. In addition, comments under the breath that were audible to the staff member but quiet enough for the pupil to deny were also common.

Iain in his second placement school heard comments in the corridor and in one situation heard a pupil ask about his sexuality to one of his friends, the comment being made loud enough for Iain to hear.

**IAIN** Yeah. I've heard at my second placement school and the school I'm at now. At my second placement school I think it was because I wore an earring. And it's presumed that if you've got an earring you must be gay ..... but there was a few incidences where I would hear things being said in the corridor or one blatant instance where one lad was waiting outside a classroom and I was just missing my class he said to one of his friends "is he gay?" and nodded in my direction, loud enough for me to hear.

Iain, NQT in Modern Languages. 26-09-2004

Paul indicates that in his experience much of the low level abuse occurs in the corridors, where the pupils are aware that catching the culprit is more difficult.

**PAUL** I have always found it's been more in the corridors. Very much less so in the classrooms. There was one child who was stupid enough to write a piece of gay graffiti once in his exercise book.

Paul, second in VI form. 2-4-2005

Again, Howard comments on the low level abuse:

**HOWARD** Lower down I did get some, a few, nasty comments. I can think of ... there was one kid ... I didn't actually teach him but when I used to go past the classroom you could hear them making 'gay', 'puff' that sort of thing, you know, sort of muttering stuff as you went past. But you couldn't actually catch them... and others who used to make silly comments behind your back, you know. Oh, he's in a bad mood today must have been out late in one of those gay pubs. That sort of thing. So I have had a few comments. None of them, none of them extremely horrible, no.

Howard, assistant head. 16-01-2005

This lower level abuse is not untypical for staff in secondary schools according to seven of the respondents, and although unsettling did not seem too much of a problem for the staff. The effect on the gay teachers here was minimal; indeed Oliver indicates that many straight colleagues are similarly taunted (see chapter 4.4.2.5).

#### **4.4.2.2 Perceived sexuality – abuse from students (direct insinuation)**

Some teachers had direct comments made to them about issues regarding sexuality in general. Although not necessarily homophobic, these comments can make staff feel either uncomfortable, or even insulted. Pupils, knowing where the line between general disrespect and plausible deniability lies, can use more subtle forms of insinuation.

Lisa tells of an incident with her lower ability year eleven English class who asked about her partner. Although partly innocent, the giggling among themselves after assuming that her partner was female could be offensive.

LISA           And so yeah, I'm open with them about what I do weekends and where I go and stuff but I don't openly say... although a joke was made "like miss what's your partner's name then? Is it Richard? Is it Mark?" and I was just rolling my eyes. And then they went is it Fiona? It's Fiona isn't it Miss? Isn't it?" And I was just "Why, you'll never know" And they just kind of like giggle amongst themselves and think nothing more of it.

Lisa, English teacher. 4-10-2004

Iain gives a good example of moments where pupils are seemingly asking innocent questions or making innocent comments, which both the pupil and teacher know are disrespectful, but have a second, unspoken meaning. Two boys ask Iain the translation of a German phrase that they 'heard someone use' in order to illicit some form of response.

IAIN           I can imagine it is because even today when I was at school I had an issue in that vein where I've had a couple of lads in year 10 come up to me asking me for a translation of a German term which basically means pretty boy. And they are doing it obviously to try and get me to say it. One of them who's asked me today does German GCSE and the other one doesn't but he's friends with this other lad. So it's obviously a little game that they've got going and they obviously know something about me and they are trying to get me to say it.

Iain, NQT in Modern Languages. 26-09-2004

#### **4.4.2.3 Perceived sexuality – abuse from students (audible abuse)**

Some teachers experienced some higher level abuse, which certainly required attention from management. Much of the time, management supports staff when having difficulty with students as a matter of course and this attitude is extended when the teachers' sexuality is targeted. Here, leadership and teacher work together to deal with issues of homophobia, institution and teacher interfacing together to correct indiscipline.

Heather experienced a more systematic form of abuse from a group of students who were undermining her authority in the classroom. Heather was not out to any of the pupils, but conformed to the stereotypical picture of a lesbian (see chapter 4.2). Here, a group of boys in a lower set when she was an NQT joined together to taunt her. Management successfully dealt with the situation, and supported Heather throughout the experience.

**MICHAEL** Have you had any comments from students?

**HEATHER** The early days of teaching I had a lot. First year in particular I had a year 11 class just once a week and I was given to see what lower ability year 11 could be like. They scared the hell out of me. They wouldn't refer to me as Miss. The boys wouldn't refer to me as Miss; they would only refer to me as Mr. There were always comments about my shoes, about my hair, they would openly call me a dyke and as a new teacher, I didn't know what to do about that. But I catalogued it along with a lot of incidents of name calling of other natures; you



know just the general complete and utter disrespect. And got senior management involved in drawing up a contract with the class. There'd be no name calling because it was time wasting and we stamped it out like that. And the kids used to holler dike down the corridor as they ran past my classroom and things like that.

Heather, second in Geography. 16-12-2004

Alison experienced comments similar to Lisa.

**ALISON** I had one group at the beginning of the year which kept like, instead of saying Miss, going Sir and laughing. OK. Which I know the best way to deal with that is just to completely ignore it and they'll get sick of it in the end. Which they have. And this hasn't been an issue. But I mean there's often the sort of often the comment here and the comment there about oh you know 'do you live with your boyfriend? Or is it your girlfriend Miss?'

Alison, maths teacher. 8-12-2004

Peter as a supply teacher reported more direct forms of abuse from pupils when on a long term contract. This included strong insults and incidents of graffiti.

**PETER** Full time this was in Newcastle that was covering the long-term sickness for a guy not expected to come back and he didn't, that was twelve months. I wasn't out to the kids; I was out to the staff again whenever it came up so, probably. Started getting homophobic abuse from kids, graffiti on my desk, it got quite outrageous, no support at all from management, I sent loads and loads of memos, this was probably just before Christmas, first term, loads of memos to staff saying this is outrageous. I'm being called a fucking queer and this that and the other.

Peter, ICT teacher. 25-04-2005

#### **4.4.2.4 Perceived sexuality – abuse from students (physical abuse)**

None of the teachers who were interviewed reported any physical abuse. However, during the stimulus cards section of the interview, Joan told the story of a lesbian teacher at her former school who had been attacked outside of school by some of the older pupils. This is not a common occurrence; but Joan, when prompted using the stimulus card one, a newspaper article which reports the case of a lesbian hounded out of her school by abuse from the students, discussed the situation at some length.

**JOAN** No. There is one teacher actually; this is a couple of years ago, a PE teacher who was beaten up because she was gay, after school, by pupils.

**MICHAEL** In one of the rough schools you were in?

**JOAN** No in the school I'm in now in the nice school. She was beaten up one night outside of the school, well in the town where I teach and she ended up having to leave, she couldn't go back to school. There were charges brought and all sorts. I don't know the final outcome. She had to leave.

**MICHAEL** What did management do at that point? Were they supportive?

**JOAN** I don't know. I think they were to an extent. Yes. It went to the police and it was taken out of school's control. She didn't come back.

**JOAN** They were a gang of about four or five, I think, who just started taunting her, they were calling her names, to do with her being gay and being in a relationship and I think in the end she retaliated which is not the thing for a teacher to do unfortunately.

**MICHAEL** So did, I mean, how did they know that she was definitely gay or did they just assume?

**JOAN** It was quite obvious I think. She was quite butch for want of a better word. And I think some PE teachers, if I can say this, [laughs] are gay! You know it seems to

be a subject that often attracts gay women.

Joan, special needs. 12-01-2005

#### **4.4.2.5 Pupil perception of sexuality**

It is interesting to note (chapter 4.2) that none of the teachers who were partially or fully out to the student body received homophobic abuse. However, this does not mean that homophobic abuse stops when teachers are open about their sexuality. As has been shown, teachers who are out in the classroom are only in schools where the climate is appropriate for such disclosure; teachers consider the climate in a school and decide how far to come out. A decision is made as to how far out remains safe.

Emily, who has had no particular problems personally at her current school talks of a lesbian member of middle management, who although she is not officially out to pupils, is perceived as a lesbian because she conforms to the stereotypical 'butch lesbian' image. She also confirms that some pupils are looking to 'beat' the teachers and use whatever weaknesses they can find in order to do so, and if this includes sexuality then so be it.

**EMILY** They probably would because they look for your weakness don't they. And if they think she looks like the stereotypical butch lesbian, she does, I think the kids are really really good at finding... at being very perceptive. The way she

carries herself for example, you would think straight away just looking at her she's got a stereotypical image. There's no way of getting round that for her and, but she's confident with herself. She's confident with her sexuality and she's in a stable relationship, she's got everything in that way. She's a very positive person, but I wouldn't put it past the kids that no matter what that, like I said earlier, the Achilles heel thing, they just look for it whether it's a physical disfigurement or it's a ...

Emily, second in English. 4-10-2004

Heather, who earlier on in her career had some difficulties with verbal abuse (see chapter 4.4.2.3), also notices that since she grew her hair (the reference here understood to mean that she had short hair before hand, and that this was considered stereotypically lesbian by the students) she experienced fewer homophobic comments.

HEATHER I've certainly not experienced any kind of homophobic comments at all in the last couple of years, directly linked to when I grew me hair [laughs].

Heather, second in Geography. 16-12-2004

Julie assumes that none of the pupils perceive her to be a lesbian because she does not conform to that stereotypical image.

JULIE No, no never said anything at all. I think ... I always get the impression that kids will judge people very much by their appearance in that respect and there would have been, I would have thought, no much about my appearance when I am at work, wearing my skirts and everything, you know, I wouldn't conform to what they would think of as a stereotype of a lesbian.

Julie, head of German. 11-05-2005

Chris also indicates that it is the stereotypical image which triggers abuse.

CHRIS Yes, yes. In terms of lesbian. I have worked with a couple at my last school. Likewise. I think again if you are a weak character and you ... you know, and you are a big woman, a butch dyke, then you know you are a target.

Chris, deputy head. 10-04-2005

It is interesting to note that it is not only gay and lesbian members of staff who occasionally experience homophobic abuse based on perceived sexuality. Oliver recalls one male teacher who is effeminate who also experiences abuse.

OLIVER There's another guy in school who's a science teacher who is ridiculously camp with the kids, bizarrely enough though he is actually married with several children apparently, he's never had a gay thought in his life but all the kids assume that he is but he's kind of not. Aven't knaa, [I don't know] I don't think the kids really .... 'cos he's a bit kind of ... I'm trying to think of a way to put it. ... because he is very very gay but dithery with it, he's a bit kind of like "some mothers do have 'em" kind of bloke, so I don't think the kids respect him much .... Yeah, he get's the puff and queer comments, yeah.

Oliver, art teacher. 24-02-2005

It is evident, therefore, that some respondents believe that students respond not only to the gay – straight axis but also the camp – butch / fem<sup>15</sup> – butch axis. In addition, several of the respondents who had not reported any forms of abuse from the students indicated that there is a correlation between the strength of the teacher in the classroom and amount of name calling or homophobia; the

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<sup>15</sup> See Glossary of specialist vocabulary, p. 10.

stronger the teacher (either more strict or more effective practitioner) the less abuse.

Ruth reflects on her own position as an out lesbian teacher, who is liked by the pupils and who has not experienced abuse at school. She also sees that pupils focus on the vulnerabilities of staff members, but links her own lack of homophobic experience with the climate of her classroom and abilities as a classroom practitioner. When asked whether there was a prevailing attitude of latent homophobia among the students, and whether their response to other gay staff would be the same as her experience she states:

**RUTH** But, as I said before, if you were not a popular, ... I think I am a fairly popular teacher, I think the kids quite like me, I have good relationships with most of the kids I teach ... I just don't know ... yes, well I can see kids focusing in on anybody's vulnerabilities, you know, that's the nature of the game.

Ruth, second in History. 18-03-2005

Chris links the two issues together, indicating that since pupils perceive gay as both camp and weak, effeminate men in the classroom are perceived as weak, and therefore can suffer from indiscipline.

**CHRIS** Yes, yes. I think also, I think if you asked it's a stereotype really. If you asked the students what they perceived to be somebody who is gay they would then, it would be somebody who tends to be rather effeminate, I would say. Certainly from my experience from working in schools. And also poor disciplinarian because I think discipline is crucial and I think if you are quite poor that way you tend to get more ...

Chris, deputy head. 10-04-2005

He also looks at the situation from the other perspective; if a male member of staff is weak, he is perceived as being gay due to the fact he is a weak disciplinarian. Here, the issue is gender based rather than sexuality. Pupils understand the stereotype of men being strong and commanding, and if they are not, they are not seen as 'real men' and labelled gay.

CHRIS [laughs] I think kids perceive, if they perceive somebody to be weak then they try and identify a cause for that and I think it is very easy to be a male member of staff and if you are a very weak disciplinarian you are perceived as gay because they perceive gay men, it's like you say, to be weak people rather than being ...

Chris, deputy head. 10-04-2005

#### **4.4.2.6 Concluding comments**

Several of the respondents had experienced some form of abuse from the students, ranging from barely audible comments which pupils can plausibly deny, through to direct abuse and homophobic name calling. However other interviewees had not experienced homophobia from the student body but offered insights into pupil behaviour. Some linked the rate of homophobic name calling to the extent to which the teachers fell into gay and lesbian stereotypes (camp gay men, butch lesbians), whereas others linked it to effective classroom

management or classroom skill; that is, the stronger and more effective the teacher in the classroom, the less abuse from the pupils. The theory that pupils will always try to find the Achilles heel of individual teachers, and that sexuality is one area that pupils will pick up on was voiced, and that the more confident a practitioner, the less likely that any part of a teacher's appearance or personality would be attacked.

#### **4.4.3 Issues with staff**

##### **4.4.3.1 Covert or 'non-direct' homophobia**

Those interviewed experienced very little overt homophobia from staff. This may be a combination of teachers only coming out officially to those they knew to be pro-gay or liberal on other matters (see chapter 4.2), but also due to the fact that teachers have support from all of the teaching unions and the GTC (General Teaching Council) in as far as homophobia is concerned. Official complaints can be made if teachers experience homophobia from peers or managers. However, in the same ways that pupils can use more subtle ways to make their feelings known, so some of the respondents have been made to feel uncomfortable by non-verbal communication and pointed jokes.

Joan, who in addition to teaching, also supports visually impaired pupils in the mainstream curriculum has had no problems with staff at all, except for one



female who Joan reports as having homophobic attitudes, and who, according to Joan, expresses her disapproval towards her through non-verbal communication. However, no proof of this negative attitude as being homophobic was offered.

**JOAN** There is one who is very anti, who makes things difficult and just sort of ignores me virtually in the corridor. Who will say hello and nothing more. And unfortunately I have to work quite closely with her because she's in charge of the tutor group where some of my pupils are, so that's a bit difficult. I just sense this... animosity is maybe a bit strong... well, disapproval.

Joan, special needs. 12-01-2005

Some staff, on hearing stories of homophobia, decide not to come out at all for fear of harassment, that is to say that overt homophobia leads the members of staff not to disclose their sexual identity. When supporting a PSE lesson in his teaching practice school, Iain was involved in a conversation where the teacher expressed extreme homophobic views. Iain did not feel comfortable coming out to this member of staff.

**IAIN** And then I had a bit of a situation with one of the teachers there who was Algerian and Muslim and was talking to me about PSE class, 'cos I was taking his form for PSE while on placement and he said to me that he found PSE difficult because he had to... he found himself having to condone things like homosexuality which he said, which he considered an abomination and unnatural and he wasn't happy teaching the kids that it was right. ... He actually said that if he found out that his son was gay he would take him out and shoot him.

Iain, NQT in Modern Languages. 26-09-2004

Heather, having heard about past incidences of overt homophobia made the decision not to come out formally to all staff for fear of verbal abuse and staff making her life more difficult. Such stories can have a major effect on staff starting at a new school, as the decision to come out can have an effect on life at work, as has been shown.

HEATHER It was based on a comment... based on something that I was told as I started at the school, a friend of mine had been on teaching practice there, I was warned about members of staff who... emm, how's the best way to put it?... were quite narrow minded in their views. And one story came out about a girl, a woman who had been on the staff previously who had left and that she had pretty much been hounded by these certain members of staff for being gay. And that it had just become intolerable to her and it was one of the factors that led to her leaving. I just thought... it made me think like I don't need them to know this about me.

Heather, second in Geography. 16-12-2004

#### **4.4.3.2 Overt or 'direct' homophobia**

Some incidents of overt homophobia from staff were reported. Although small in number, and often made in jest, these comments can be seen as unfair by the members of staff concerned. Such comments are not often made in the public arena about people of a different race or ability.

Fiona leads Cadet Force, which is an extra-curricular activity at her school. Once a year she takes a group of students to Scotland to experience life as a sailor. On arriving back at (her single sex, all male) school, she found herself in a difficult conversation audible to others in the staffroom.

FIONA            One of the guys who'd done some cover for me while I was away, somebody I really don't know very well at all, a music teacher, was in the staff room and he said 'oh well were there any nice sailors up there' and I was like 'I didn't get to meet that many people' and he went 'Any nice women in uniform then?' in a really bitchy way and I went 'cheers, thanks not only have you said it in such a nasty way but you have said it in front of the staff room and God knows who is listening'

Fiona, science teacher. 1-11-2004.

This comment was audible and a direct insinuation as to Fiona's sexuality. The predominantly male nature of this staff room may have also led to a situation where the male teacher felt more able to make disparaging remarks towards a female member of staff.

Mark has not experienced much in the way of direct homophobia. His relationships with students are strong, and he has not confirmed his sexuality to anyone on staff. However, assumptions have been made about him which he has not sought to deny. He and some other members of staff have friends in common and Mark assumes that in this way he has been outed to the staff over the years.

However, Mark reports that he has experienced taunts in whole staff meetings on two occasions. The first made by a member of the science department.

**MARK** Well there was once, we were in a staff meeting, and as it happened all the staff were in there, and as it happened two of the science teachers, two blokes, were getting married at the same weekend and in the briefing the head happened to mention that congratulations to these two guys because they were getting married at the weekend. So of course all the innuendos and jokes were they were getting married together. Everyone was kind of, few of the jokers in the staff were throwing the comments in about them being a gay couple and things and somebody shouted across to one of them 'so which name do you want to be called when you come back?' and I think he was very embarrassed and I don't think he thought about what he was saying and his response was 'just call me Mark'.

**MICHAEL** Right.

**MARK** Which I wasn't very happy about as you can imagine and I chose to ignore but I heard it all the same. And I can't think of any other reason why he would say that other than ... unless it was aimed at me because there was no other Marks on the staff so ...

**MICHAEL** Well, that's quite a comment, that's quite a comment.

**MARK** It's quite a naughty comment actually. If I wanted to take it further I probably could have.

Mark, SENCO. 4-04-2005

The second comment was made by the head teacher. Having made a first innuendo in a staff meeting that was greeted with laughter, the head went one stage further by stressing the word annals (the link between annals and anal / anus being understood by the staff, according to Mark) when continuing the

exchange about Mark's absence from work due to an operation on his left hand.

This experience embarrassed Mark and shocked others on staff.

**MARK** I'd had an operation on my arm and was in traction for about three months and it was my left hand, I was left handed, and I had gone into work and again I was in the briefing. And I don't know what the head was ... he hasn't got the greatest people skills anyway ... or didn't have which was one of the problems that we had, but he passed comment about the fact that I [was] back to work and said welcome back, it was his left arm that Mark had had the operation on and I know he is doing everything he can to get that left hand working again. Which, obviously, the innuendos of that, everyone started to giggle and laugh in the staff meeting. Which, fair enough you know, it was meant to be ... it was meant as a joke. He knew what he was saying and it was meant to be a joke and I mean I was quite embarrassed by it because I do get embarrassed easy, especially in public, and obviously he was suggesting I was sort of wanking a lot to get my arm working again and so that would have been bad enough but then when he got a laugh he must have thought he was on a roll and he made some comment along the lines of 'well that's one for the *annals*, isn't it?'

**MICHAEL** Right.

**MARK** And there was a few people kind of sort of looked around quite shocked that he had said something like that.

Mark, SENCO. 4-04-2005

Although Mark realised that both of these situations were supposed to be humorous and non-offensive, nonetheless he was embarrassed; it cannot be assumed that mild jokes based on sexuality will not cause offence to those involved. It is clear, however, that different individuals take these jokes in different ways (see also chapter 4.6.5).

#### **4.4.3.3 Discrimination**

Although some of the respondents had reported mild forms of homophobia from staff on occasion, none were able to give concrete examples of direct discrimination. This is probably due to the fact that it is illegal in state schools, and difficult to justify legally in private or faith schools. However, some examples of extreme pressure put on staff are to be found, thus forcing members of staff out of the school. In these cases, respondents feel that this was due to their sexuality, although this is difficult to prove.

When asked about whether being gay might have an effect on his career, working in a faith school, Iain considers that being out may have a detrimental effect. As an NQT with a temporary responsibility for German and on a one year contract initially, he feels that if management wanted to do so, they could terminate his employment or at the least, remove his temporary promotion. Although implicitly out, Iain feels that if he formally declares his sexuality to everyone, this would be used against him.

IAIN I'm on trial really this year for the job that I've got, the coordination job and it's crossed my mind a few times that the head or deputy head who apparently is every phobic under the sun, xenophobic, homophobic, if they found out that I was gay that they would find some excuse for me not to keep the job at the end of the year, probably under the guise of "oh well you're an NQT we feel like you've struggled a little bit". They could find any number of reasons not to sort of keep the job for keeps basically. And it has crossed my mind that that might be

used as a reason, well not overtly, but they might have that as a reason for not keeping me on.

Iain, NQT in Modern Languages. 26-09-2004

Oliver felt animosity from his head of faculty for the whole time he was working at his first school. Again, nothing was directly said, but because of his more senior position, the head of faculty was able to manipulate the perception that senior management had of Oliver. Oliver felt blocked in his career, to the extent that he changed schools. He felt pushed out of his post at his first school. He describes the head of faculty:

**OLIVER** He was woodwork teacher, very very old fashioned, not that necessarily religion has anything to do with homophobia, he was really kind of Christian in his ideals and his life, he would do things like take nuns to do charity work on the weekend and stuff and I generally felt from the word go that as soon as he realised the kind of person I was he basically felt I shouldn't be in contact with children. I would imagine, to be honest, he never said it but I generally thought, he questions why I'm a teacher because I'm gay. "He's gay, why did he become a teacher if he's gay? Is there an ulterior motive?"

Oliver, art teacher. 24-02-2005

In order to confirm whether or not this was paranoia on the part of Oliver, other evidence was sought to confirm whether or not he was a weak teacher who was under pressure to improve performance or leave. When asked, Oliver reported that he had always had good lesson observations and passed performance management. This was confirmed by one of Oliver's colleagues as one of the triangulation techniques employed during the project (chapter 3). However, it is

reported that a second, alternative picture was painted of Oliver as a teacher to senior management. The head of faculty undermined Oliver's position, and was able to do so due to his position and power. Although sexuality was never mentioned, it was clear to Oliver that homophobia was the motivating factor behind the head of faculty's actions.

**OLIVER** Basically he was like he would constantly do things that were deliberately designed to undermine me and deliberately designed to make my life difficult which he didn't do for anybody else in the faculty.

**MICHAEL** And do you think that is because he didn't value your teaching or because he didn't value you?

**OLIVER** I think because he didn't value me. My teaching is fine and everybody else I ever met was fine with my teaching and the way I was with the kids and the way kids responded to me.

**MICHAEL** Performance management was appropriate.

**OLIVER** Yeah.

**MICHAEL** Do you think that had you stayed there your promotion would have been blocked for your sexuality? What was the head like with management?

**OLIVER** The problem I had was I had a line manager who totally undervalued me. My line manager was basically of the opinion that I should not be in education at any point ever, because obviously he was telling..... he was the liaison between me and management, the management only really saw what he told them and so, therefore, the management in the school got the opinion from him that I was completely disorganised that I was an appallingly bad teacher, that I was totally unprofessional with the kids, etc and even though obviously whatever I got in lesson observations with line management, performance management and that kind of stuff they were always fine and I never had any problems in my classroom I was constantly looked on as not being a professional teacher right the way through. But there was a lot of men, there were no women at all on the senior management team either, so there was a lot of men who obviously had quite old fashioned ideals about education and teachers and basically saw me as something they never really had any information on.



Oliver, art teacher. 24-02-2005

Having taken a break from teaching to travel abroad, Fiona was desperate to find a job. However, she was appalled at interview to find herself being asked questions which were not appropriate in that setting.

FIONA 'Are you married?' They actually asked me that. 'Have you got a partner? Have you got children?' Yes I have got a partner. 'What does he do?' At that point I chickened out and I said 'oh he does ... ', whatever she did at that, you know, my partner at the time whatever she did. I thought I don't want to let the headmaster in on this one. Because when somebody has got that attitude that they immediately assume the gender of your partner, you know, I normally assume that that means they haven't got a very open minded attitude to any partners you might have so ...

Fiona, science teacher. 1-11-2004.

She again felt that her teaching was being criticized as a smoke-screen in order to put enough pressure on her to leave, primarily because of her sexuality. Here she tells of the requirement to have her lessons observed, but at the same time compares herself with other members of the department in as far as organization and results are concerned, and does not see a justification for the termination of her contract.

FIONA I try not to put too many things together and make 17 but, I got called in by the headmaster who said that he had some issues with the way that I was teaching and [that] he wasn't happy with so he put me on a temporary contract. So I have been lesson observed and mentored every week since then by head of science and they have now decided not to renew that contract

a year later. I would leave anyway, I wouldn't stay. But as far as I can see .. for example, this evening parents' conference - it's the last one they ever have, it is really important so I take with me their coursework, I have their exam I have given them last week and marked and then in the same office as me there is one of the other teachers who's been there for, I don't know, she's only a few years older than me but she has been at the school for her entire career, and she is going round saying 'I don't know what I am going to say to these parents. I haven't marked their coursework, I haven't even given them this mock exam yet' and I am just standing there thinking so why the hell is it me who hasn't got a job then? And I really don't know why, because their official excuse is that my term grades weren't good enough and pieces of my lessons weren't good enough but that is not what the stats actually show because last year my AS set all of them got As and Bs apart from one girl whose mum had just died so, you know, she's not going to do that well and of my GCSE group only two of them got Cs and both of them were foundation school candidates who could only get a C.

Fiona, science teacher. 1-11-2004.

In both of these situations respondents consider that problems within the institution are based on homophobia, and have reported it as this. If homophobia was the core reason for the prejudicial behaviour it needed to remain hidden due to legislation. Thus, it is difficult to prove any direct prejudice based on sexuality.

#### **4.4.4 Concluding comment**

Julie considers the whole climate for teachers as being homophobic; that unlike straight teachers, gay teachers cannot just automatically come out in the

classroom without a second thought. She laments this, as having a negative effect on teaching and learning in her classroom.

**JULIE** I think that the fact that we can't, or you may feel that you haven't been as relaxed and open about yourself, or it might not be as easy to be as open or relaxed about yourself, does ...is bound to have a little bit of a negative effect on the way you are with kids and the way you are in the classroom. I have definitely noticed that myself. I think I would enjoy school a whole lot more if I could just be completely, sort of myself all the time and that has an effect on teaching in the classroom, I'm sure.

Julie, head of German. 11-05-2005

By identifying this issue, Julie highlights one of the impacts that homophobia or heterosexism can have in the classroom. Thus, in Julie's opinion, homophobia affects not only the teaching staff but also the standard of teaching that the pupils receive.

#### **4.4.5 Critical discussion**

Reports of homophobia and discrimination here are similar to those in other cognate pieces of research. Ferfolja (1998) describes the harassment as experienced by interviewees, especially by males in the 15-19 age group. In Ferfolja (2005) she reports that she uncovered practices such as threats of dismissal, forced resignations and implicit harassment from staff. Nixon and Givens find some 'expected, but still surprising evidence of prejudice' (2004: 219).

Some interviewees in this project report to have had problems at work due to their sexuality, be they implicitly or explicitly out. Both in the classroom and in the staffroom there seems to be a gradation of how overt people are willing to be. Both pupils and staff can use underhand insinuations or jokes to make gay and lesbian teachers feel uncomfortable, and on occasions both pupils and teachers are reported to make up front remarks that are homophobic. Discrimination, although not commonplace among the interviewees, is not overt. When interviewees report difficulties, they interpret that different reasons are found to use as excuses for homophobic discrimination. This is their interpretation of events, and where possible within the purview of this project an attempt was made to validate such claims. However, the negative experiences here mirror those reported in other studies.

No significant differences were seen between gay men and lesbians in this respect. Fiona, working in a male single-sex school may have been in a more powerless situation than others; however, it does not seem that lesbians were more at risk of prejudice due to compound issues of both gender and sexuality. As mentioned above, the issue, as highlighted by the respondents, is considered to be the extent to which the teachers fell into gay and lesbian stereotypes (camp gay men, butch lesbians), and their strength as practitioners, rather than their sexuality, or indeed their gender.

It is important to keep these comments in perspective. Most of the time respondents reported that they have tackled their job on a professional level and fulfilled their teaching and management duties without reference to their sexuality. Here the effect of the institution on their sexual expression is reported to be limited. Pupils were reported, in the study, to make comments about the perceived sexuality of the teacher. However, as has also been reported by the teachers, this abuse is often triggered by the extent to which any particular teacher conforms to gay male or lesbian stereotypes. It has been noted that some teachers received no abuse; teachers out to the whole student body are among these, although all of these in this study are working in schools where the climate is appropriate for such disclosure. However, no respondent (even as head teacher or member of leadership teams) cited a commitment to eradicating homophobia by developing pro-gay agendas and positively encouraging gay staff to come out in order to help encourage tolerance and combat prejudice.

## On gay role models

**MICHAEL** You could be a great role model for gay staff!

**SIMON** If I could go out there and carry it off yeah I could. But, hell, the job is difficult enough as it is! When you have a parent telling you to fuck off, when you've got kids beating the living daylights out of each other, when you've got a member of staff who just doesn't understand what it is they are supposed to be doing and however much support you put in you can't help them, when you've got two of your office staff slapping each other in the office in front of parents and when you've got a building falling down, and when you've got a governor doing things that they really shouldn't do, do I really want to then go out and say "hey guys, I'm gay, isn't it great?". Well actually, no, because all of that happened yesterday.

Simon, head teacher. 15-01-2005

## **4.5 On role models**

### **4.5.1 Introduction**

Although the institution as a whole often exerts pressure on teachers to remain silent about their sexuality in the classroom, teachers do and can have an effect on straight and gay students alike as role models.

The issues concerning gay and lesbian role models could be seen as more complex than for ethnic minority teacher populations or for teachers with disabilities. Many of the related issues depend on to what extent the teacher and / or the pupil has disclosed their sexuality. Indeed, since many of the teachers have not officially come out, their ability to be role models rests on assumptions made by the gay or lesbian students. However, as can be seen (chapter 4.6), sexual orientation is often confirmed by non-verbal connection or by not rejecting assumptions. We have seen that the majority of teachers in this study were either 'implicitly out' (you can see me as gay if you want to) or 'explicitly out' (I know you know, you know I know you know (see Table 2.1)), thus the idea of role models is pertinent here. In addition, the complexities of officially disclosing sexuality become apparent here. Griffin's model, as described above (see chapter 2) does not allow for degrees of disclosure. Sometimes teachers out themselves to gay pupils assuming that because of their own status, the pupils

themselves will not share this information with other members of the student body. Thus, teachers can be 'explicitly out' to the student body, but officially out to only certain members.

Acting as a role model is one way in which a gay teacher can influence the institution in which they are working, modelling tolerance, and acceptance. Being a competent, self-assured professional who happens to be gay could be useful for those struggling with their own sexuality, and students who struggle to accept the existence of different sexualities (see chapter 2 for discussion on usefulness of role models in general). Of course, the out teacher or the teacher who allows pupils to make assumptions could also act as a positive role model among the straight student population. When considering role models I shall consider respondents' discussions on the issues of quality and purpose of role models before looking at the respondents' own experiences as students themselves. I shall continue by giving examples of times when the respondents acted as role models, be they implicitly or explicitly out.

#### **4.5.2 Quality of role models**

When considering role models, many of the respondents believe that it is important for young gay men and lesbians in school to have gay role models. This is often contextualised in the need for many different types of role models within an educational context (teachers from different ethnic minorities, teachers



with disabilities, male food technology teachers, female resistant materials teachers etc). This is born from the belief that all members of a school community should learn to be tolerant and accepting of difference.

Jonathan mentions the fact that it may be difficult to find candidates for posts from different groups in society, but that all members of the community should be represented.

**JONATHAN** Schools, yes should provide role models. If the community is large enough then you can provide role models within the school, great. We did not... we had a very much lower than average ethnic minority in the area so yes although we had pupils from various ethnic backgrounds they were a very small proportion. So again it was difficult to provide role models unless you found candidates..... So it would be great if there was one or more gay or lesbian teachers in schools who was out. It would be great for the school, it would make them face up to issues of tolerance and compatibility and getting on with each other and acceptance, in accepting. I'm sure it would have an influence on the bullying policy.

Jonathan, deputy head. 10-10-2004

Fiona also considers a variety of role models as important, but as a female science specialist, she also links this to gender differences across subject areas.

**MICHAEL** Do you think it is important for gay students to have gay role models in school?

**FIONA** I think for all kids it is important to have a variety of people influencing them, especially so for the kids who come from families where they don't get exposed to a lot of people from different societies..... Absolutely they should because I think it's irresponsible to bring children just one point of view, the whole point is you are there to educate them not to tell them what they are being told at home is the

only right way of doing something. And so for the same reason we need to have lots more female maths teachers, I mean if there [were] more women maths teachers, if they get more men home economics teachers, you know you need to get everything being a lot more mixed and a lot more representative. Easier said than done.

Fiona, science teacher. 1-11-2004

More specifically, when pressed, Morgan succinctly expresses what many of the respondents believe about gay teachers as role models:

**MORGAN** Yeah, I think that would be very important as the children... as the students got older. Key stage four and above would be really important, but I don't think it has any effect on key stage three children because they're not sure of their sexuality any way.

Morgan, assistant head. 23-01-2005

However, it was made clear by several of the respondents that it was not only the sexuality of the teacher that is important. Several considered strength of character and teaching ability as important in this regard. These thoughts were expressed by both younger and more experienced teachers.

Iain, an NQT, considers how positive a role model out gay teachers could be. According to Iain teachers would be a positive role model if the students responded to them in a positive way, but if the student-teacher relationship became strained, then the teacher may find themselves in a difficult situation if

they did not have the backing of the students body; this may detract from the positive aspects they could bring to school as a gay role model.

**IAIN** I think it would depend on how the kids handled it. If they reacted positively then of course if it turns into a positive gay role model but if it opens a can of worms for them then obviously it isn't a better school. I don't think it necessarily would be a better school just because the openly lesbian or gay teacher could be a twat!

Iain, NQT in Modern Languages. 26-09-2004

Alison is not the only teacher who defines as lesbian or gay at her school; there is a gay man working in the art department who Alison perceives as having a promiscuous lifestyle and as being less responsible. She considers this teacher as being a negative role model, and therefore does not consider gay or lesbian teachers as automatically being classed as a positive role model for the students.

**MICHAEL** So, do you think it would be important for gay pupils to have gay role models in school?

**ALISON** I think it's a dangerous thing, isn't it? If you go into a school as a gay teacher are you expected to be a gay role model and, to be honest, if my son was gay I wouldn't want him to be modeling himself off the teacher that we have got at our school. So there is that issue. Just because you are gay doesn't mean you are a good gay role model. Just because you're black doesn't mean you are a good black role model.

**MICHAEL** Yes, just because you're black doesn't mean you are a good black role model.

**ALISON** And, it doesn't necessarily follow and, you know, I think that probably better role models to have are people that have respectful, stable relationships than just exclusively because of their sexuality.

Alison, maths teacher. 8-12-2004

According to Alison the school management also has issues with the approach of the gay colleague (see chapter 4.3). Here, the issue of role model is seen as much wider than sexuality. She sees his openness about sexual encounters and promiscuity as a barrier to him being a good role model for children in general.

Simon, who is a head teacher, when asked about appointing gay men and lesbians to his staff in the context of developing a more diverse staff in as far as role models is concerned also looks at the whole picture, not just the teacher's sexuality.

**SIMON** Yeah. Yeah, as long as they're a good teacher. If they're a crap teacher then they're not are they. Because let's face it, if you were going to say to me OK on this interview panel all you've got is two gay teachers who do you want, I'd plump for the best teacher because they are going to be the best role model. But if they are both weak teachers I don't want either of them, and if they are both good teachers I'd want both of them. But my first priority is good teachers and it doesn't matter to me whether they are gay, lesbian, straight, Asian, Chinese whatever .... it's a bonus.

Simon, head teacher. 15-01-2005

Sixteen of the respondents were recorded to believe that it was important to have gay men and lesbians as teachers to act as role models. Many, however, see this as being part of a bigger picture; that of having all members of the community represented. Some respondents refined their thinking by considering the quality of the role model, indicating that just because someone is gay or lesbian this does not automatically make them a good role model for students;

they also need to be a good and fair person, and a good practitioner. The respondents showed both interest and insight into this issue, indicating that many of them had thought about this issue within their working lives. Opinions were well formed and strong in many cases; this issue brought lively debate and thoughtful comments from several of the interviewees.

### **4.5.3 Purpose of role models**

In as far as coming out is concerned, some of the respondents indicated that having a gay teacher who could be classed as a role model could have helped in their coming out process. Here, knowing that an adult has come to terms with issues of sexuality could give hope and encouragement to those going through similar personal difficulties at school. Iain considers the difficulties he went through as a student, and how he could have been helped by gay role models among the staff.

**MICHAEL** Do you not think that it would have been better for you as a gay kid at school to have had an out gay member of staff?

**IAIN** Yes and no. Yes from the point of view that it would have probably shown me that being gay doesn't mean that you're a total pervert which is a phase that you go through, especially when you're a Catholic. But no from the point of view that I don't think anything when you are going through those initial stages will convince you that it's OK. I think that you just go through a really tumultuous stage where you think that it's wrong and that's it.

Iain, NQT in Modern Languages. 26-09-2004

Lisa also indicates that she feels it is important for students to have gay role models to help them come to terms with their sexuality. When asked about whether students should have access to gay and lesbian teachers as role models she responds:

LISA I'd thought about having strong role models obviously but I'd never thought about along the sexuality lines. But I do think it's important that kids do have somebody so they can look and think yeah they live their lives in this way quite openly and it's OK for them so maybe it's not such a big deal for me.

Lisa, English teacher. 2-10-2004

Peter considers the importance of gay role models for the whole school population. He comes from the perspective that the more individuals come into contact with gay people, the more likely they are not to hold homophobic views. When considering statistics on homophobic attacks that he collated when doing research for Schools Out! national news, he concluded that gay and lesbian teachers would have a positive effect on the behaviour of young men, in as far as homophobia is concerned.

PETER I read a lot of research, there is also evidence to show that most, the vast majority of homophobic attacks are perpetrated by young men 15 to 24. I.e. people who have just left the education system. And the education system has failed them. So I would like to think in some small way that a potential homophobe might be in a gang on the verge of kicking some queer's head in Time Square [area in Newcastle where most gay venues are situated] and might just stop to think, Oh actually, we had a gay teacher, he was a bit of a cunt, but he doesn't deserve a head kicking.

Peter, ICT teacher. 25-04-2005

#### **4.5.4 The effect of lesbian and gay teachers on the respondents**

Participants gave a variety of reasons for choosing teaching as a career. No-one cited wanting to become a role model for gay and lesbian students as a primary reason for entering teaching. Iain encapsulates this when he was questioned further about his motivations for going into teaching.

IAIN            Yeah, I want to teach because I want to teach but I'm a gay person who wants to teach.

Iain, NQT in Modern Languages. 26-09-2004

This understanding of 'teacher first, gay second' was common to all of the respondents. As outlined above (chapter 4.4), most of the time the respondents led their professional lives without reference to their sexuality.

However, Emily remembers some lesbian and gay teachers from her childhood who did encourage her to go into teaching. She really looked up to these teachers, and admired them as practitioners. This had a positive effect on her desire to go into teaching.

EMILY            When I was younger I'd got great role models at school, mainly female, and I'm

still friends with them now, I still see them when I go back home and we still have really good contact with each other. So I always looked up to those teachers and admired them and everything that they... the way they acted and their lessons.

**MICHAEL** Did you know of any gay teachers when you were at school?

**EMILY** Yeah I did. I'm still friends with them now.

**MICHAEL** Are these the same role models?

**EMILY** Yeah apart from one of them who was a lesbian who was my head of year 10 and she was gay but she's died since. So there was her who I knew at the time was gay.

**MICHAEL** Was she out to the whole school? Were there any out to the whole school?

**EMILY** The men, the male teachers were. And some of the women. This particular woman I'm talking about, she was out in a way, I knew in a different way than the school because my mum nursed her while she was ill so I know, my mum was a nurse and I knew it through that way.

Emily, second in English. 4-10-2004

Although Emily does not cite being a lesbian role model herself as one of the reasons she chose teaching as a career, she believes the fact that she had role models at school in her school had a positive effect on her in her youth, and gave her examples of excellent practitioners who happened to be lesbian.

Once again, however, it seems the quality of teaching and relationship with the students had a direct effect on whether or not teachers are seen as role models. Julie remembers back to her time as a pupil, and recalls two lesbian teachers, but does not particularly see them as being role models for her. Once again, the



situation is complex; just being a gay teacher does not equate with being a role model for gay students.

**JULIE** Well there were certainly two, it was an all girls' school and most staff were female, and two women who we knew lived together and who looked ... that look as we were saying earlier ... who looked very lesbian and we just sort of knew. But I don't remember anybody actually saying anything. So it wasn't that they'd got up and said but it was just sort of widely and commonly known.

**MICHAEL** And was that helpful for you or was it just?

**JULIE** No I think at that stage I thought they were a bit weird like everybody else did actually. They weren't ... unfortunately neither of them were teachers that I could ... sort of particularly like. They were not the most popular teachers in the school.

Julie, head of German. 11-05-2005

#### **4.5.5 Experiences of acting as a role model**

Some of the interviewees had experience of acting as a role model. Some felt they were able to do so when being only 'implicitly out' (Griffin 1992) and others were able to act as role models as they were officially out to the whole school community. The limits of Griffin's model in as far as being able to describe the degrees of disclosure to different groups of pupils has been mentioned above.

##### **4.5.5.1 Experiences of acting as a role model (implicitly out)**

The question as to whether or not role models can exist when no confirmation of sexuality is officially given is a complex one. Gay and lesbian teachers often feel

moments of satisfaction when they have been able to help pupils struggling with this aspect of reaching adulthood, but wonder whether or not the pupils have identified their orientation. The pupils in the situations described below obviously feel an affinity with the members of staff, but it is unknown whether this is based on perceived sexual orientation or not.

Heather feels that she helped two students in the school who defined themselves as gay. As mentioned below (chapter 4.6) Heather had an intimate conversation with a year ten girl who was worried that her mother would respond to her sexuality in a homophobic way, and needed to be reassured about the validity of her orientation. In addition, she recalls a year nine boy who was totally out to his peers, although he was unpopular with staff because he was prone to outbursts in class. Being his tutor, Heather spent much of her time calming him down and preparing him for going back into curriculum areas. Heather considers whether or not she was a role model, because she was not officially out to the students.

**MICHAEL** So do you think in some ways you have been acting as a role model, certainly for those two?

**HEATHER** I don't know because we have never explicitly had a conversation about the fact that I'm gay. However, had either of them ever asked me I would have said. I don't think I would have fobbed them off. Other students perhaps, but I think they spent enough time talking to me and working their way through their own issues I don't think it would have been a problem had they ever asked.

Heather, second in Geography. 16-12-2004

Alison, who had issues with another gay member of staff acting as a role model due to his promiscuous lifestyle, had also had experience of dealing with a lesbian student with problems at school, and who needed support. When asked to give her opinions on role models at a later point in the interview, she notes that the pupil will undoubtedly look back on that situation and realise that Alison provided support as a role model.

MICHAEL      You didn't come out back to her?

ALISON        No. I didn't. Because I was very, very close and I was, sort of the way that I was phrasing things was you know, well I find, and you will find and all this sort of stuff and not implicitly saying I am gay as well but it was, to anybody listening to the conversation it was very implicit in what I was saying but not necessarily implicit to her because I don't know whether she picked up on that or whether she was ... But she ... yes, it was just ... it was quite a positive experience I think as a teacher to do that and to go through that, so ...

MICHAEL      OK. But in actual fact you said that to that girl who it mattered to, you all but came out to her in that conversation. She'll probably remember that.

ALISON        Oh, she definitely will, yes.

Alison, maths teacher. 8-12-2004

Paul when asked about role models argued initially that it is not possible to be a gay role model unless you are completely out. He agreed, however, that gay pupils would probably recognise his sexuality, and that this may be helpful. In particular, he indicated that the very fact that he has integrated his sexuality successfully into his life without needing to be totally up front with the students suggests that gay students who recognise his sexuality will realise the

importance of accepting sexual orientation as only part of one's personality. In this way, he perceived himself as a positive role model.

**MICHAEL** Do you think you are a role model to gay kids at school?

**PAUL** It goes back to the how do you know I'm gay, do you, you know. What do you judge people on and all that sort of thing really? I don't know. Would I be a role model if I came out at school? ..... You almost feel if you are a role model you should be totally up front about who you are, and I suppose I am not totally up front about who I am, but then do I need to be and why should I be? Because it is only part of my life, it is not all of my life is it? And so if the kid's gay themselves they can probably put two and two together anyway and I think it is important that being gay is a part of who you are rather than all of who you are.

Paul, second in VI form. 2-4-2005

However, he is also aware of the fact that a gay pupil having a lesbian or gay teacher does not automatically mean that a relationship based on respect and role modelling will occur.

**MICHAEL** So you feel that gay staff as role models is positive?

**PAUL** Well probably yes, probably yes it is, but only if you argue that having a lesbian or gay teacher is a positive role model for you in any case.

Paul, second in VI form. 2-4-2005

Paul sees the complexity of the issue very clearly. He understands that degree of disclosure is important, as is the strength of the role model; matching pupil to teacher by sexual orientation does not necessarily lead to a relationship based on respect.

#### **4.5.5.2 Experiences of acting as a role model (explicitly out)**

Oliver defines himself as both a Goth (sub-cultural category marked out by black attire and heavy metal music) and a gay man. His flamboyant style and close relationship with the students lead him to the conclusion that many of the older students assume he is gay.

**OLIVER** Yeah I was quite happy to have a Goth role model. I was quite happy about being a Goth role model. I think to be honest I probably am the gay role model without technically being out.

Oliver, art teacher. 24-02-2005

Oliver believes that it is important to have a close relationship with the students before confirming suspicions about sexuality. However, in his experience, the pupils have responded well, and he believes himself to be a positive role model, in comparison with other gay members of staff. As mentioned above, he states:

**OLIVER** Yeah, bizarre. I think what the best thing to do would be... if we could manage it, would be for the kids to all get to know me without thinking about my sexuality necessarily, probably thinking about it but without having it said yes I'm definitely gay, until you say are about to leave, because most of the kids, by the time they hit year 11 get on really well with me..... Whereas if they get to know me as a teacher and respect me as a teacher and get to like me as a person and then find out I'm gay, then they are like "but he's a really cool bloke". Whereas if they are like "but he's gay, I don't want to know" I think that with some kids it'll put up a barrier instantly. And I think it will with some of the parents as well.

There's another guy in school who's a science teacher who is ridiculously camp with the kids. Aven't knaa, [I don't know] I don't think the kids would really see him as a positive role model, 'cos he's a bit kind of ... I'm trying to think of a way to put it. I think they see him as being a bit kind of... because he is very very gay but dithery with it, he's a bit kind of like "some mothers do have 'em" kind of bloke.

Oliver, art teacher. 24-02-2005

By the time Oliver was known to be leaving his first post, several of the students were aware of his sexuality because he had been spotted on the gay scene by the older gay brother of one of his students.

OLIVER But also the fact that I have been seen by kids on the gay scene and in speaking about that kids obviously realised I was gay and the kids were all really supportive. It was like 'canny'. "So have you got a boyfriend Sir?" "No, we are not going there, shut up". There were a couple of the lads who were a bit "So you are bent and that" and like yeah, pretty much. Then one of the lasses would generally come out with something like "But he's no different it's the same guy!" Then they would all be like cool, mint!

MICHAEL So by the end you were quite out then?

OLIVER Yeah. Within the last few weeks before I left – it wasn't a long period of time

MICHAEL And their responses on the whole were positive?

OLIVER Yeah

Oliver, art teacher. 24-02-2005

Due to the fact that Oliver was a positive role model for the students as a good teacher and fair disciplinarian, when he finally confirmed his sexuality, their response was generally positive.

Fiona recalls the moment at which both she and several members of her upper sixth group realised that they were all lesbians. However, as she concludes, she remains unsure as to what effect her sexuality will have had on the group, as the girls were 'pretty confident young people anyway', although her immediate reaction was that it will have had a positive effect.

FIONA It was actually on the last day that I taught them just before their study year that we all went to the pub together and I came out to one of them then because I had seen her with her girlfriend, I just clicked, but I had never seen them together before so I had never figured it out, so that day the pub was like the big day, wow, everybody's gay. So that was nice. [laughs]

MICHAEL [laughs] That sounds good

FIONA I am still in touch with them. All of that year are now in their finals this year. They are all in places like Manchester.

MICHAEL So that will have had a good effect on their...

FIONA Yes, it will have. I think when they get a bit older, when it is a bit further away I might ask them whether it had any influence when they were in sixth form about whether it made them feel any different that they knew one of their teachers was gay. Because they certainly thought I was gay, they didn't have any actual confirmation of that but I just wonder to what extent that influenced how they thought about themselves, I am not sure if it did or not. Because they seem pretty confident young people anyway.

Fiona, science teacher. 1-11-2004.

Again, Howard was out to his sixth form groups, having seen them on the scene, yet he confirms that the idea of role models depends on more than just sexuality. He indicates that being an older member of staff, he had a positive effect on the gay students in the sixth form, but that one of their peers who came out, who was

indeed a popular and good looking member of the sixth form had more of an impact on the student population than an older member of staff being out.

**HOWARD** Well, at that time, particularly in that year group I am thinking of, this is actually the peer group, they left in 1999 and certainly in that last year when they were in the sixth a lot of them had come out because it was OK to come out. So it was OK. But I don't know if that is true all the time you see. I think in one year you can have an ethos. In that particular year group there was one lad who was a really nice out, I mean very outward character, as well as being out, so it was OK to be gay because he was, so it was alright. So he was like a role model for other people. Certainly they just said 'I am gay' and that's it and the staff didn't seem to mind.

**MICHAEL** So you are known as gay and you think that is good then that they have got a gay role model in school?

**HOWARD** Yes. Yes. Not so much now, I mean I am old now. Even seven or eight years ago I could ... and I was there more often ... I could ... and being sixth form tutor I was there with ... mixing with a lot of them every morning with registration time and yes I think I was probably a good positive role model. Not so much now because they must regard me as older and more distant and I am not there that often.

Howard, assistant head. 16-01-2005

Among the respondents there were several who were able to act as role models to some of the children in their school. In general these teachers understood the difficulties and complexities of the issue, but were able to identify instances when they were acting as gay role models.



#### **4.5.6 Critical discussion**

Although little has been published on the issue of gay role models in education, many parallels can be identified between the work of Carrington and Pole (see chapter 2), who considered the issues of male role models for boys in the primary sector, and black role models in schools.

Respondents in this study had a variety of opinions and experiences in as far as role models are concerned. Most believed that young people need role models representing all sections of society, and considered gay and lesbian role models as important in this light. Carrington (2002b) also calls for a more inclusive form of representation within schools. However, the quality of the role model was highlighted as important; there are respected and less respected teachers, and this does not depend on sexuality. In a similar way, Carrington (2002b) warns against viewing role models as a panacea for levels of underachievement or disengagement among ethnic minorities. He calls for more research in the area, and questions the assumption that matching pupils to teachers by ethnic background as too simplistic. This would mirror the views of participants in this study, who feel that matching pupils by sexuality for support as being overly simplistic. This was backed up by the respondents' own differing experience of school as pupils. Even respondents who felt they needed to be closeted personally or felt that for themselves sexuality is a private affair believed quality role models were good, so long as all of the community was represented.

Some respondents felt it was difficult to be a role model without openly confirming sexuality, although others felt that in retrospect pupils would identify their sexual orientation. Some respondents did have positive experiences of acting as gay and lesbian role models. It is interesting to note the strength of opinion of those interviewed in as far as role models are concerned. Many had already formed opinions on this matter, and several were well aware of the complexities associated with the issue: level of disclosure, quality of role model etc. No differences were evident between gay men or lesbians on this issue.

These individual experiences where teachers have been able to help individuals, or even help in combating prejudice by being an open influence in the school are isolated incidents. They represent a small set of moments where staff have felt able to help pupils, and all have taken place in institutions where homophobia is rejected by management or in policy. They show moments where the individual teacher has had an effect on individual pupils within the educational institution, and show that some positive moments exist within the working lives of some gay and lesbian teachers.

## On personal triumphs

**ALISON** So they're doing top three teachers and the top three kids in the class and the top three kids that they fancy in the school and they said 'if you could go out with any of the teachers in the school, which one would it be? Any of them? No but you've got to Miss, you've got to'. None of them really..... go on, pick one miss, pick one. And they were going through would it be such and such, would it be such and such? And I thought I tell you what -

'I would go out with Mr Smith', who is the [other] big gay teacher 'because me and him are going the same place in life. We'd be a match made in heaven'. And the support assistant was in stitches.

Alison, Maths teacher. 8-12-2004.

## **4.6 On personal triumphs**

### **4.6.1 Introduction**

The school as an institution (the policies, the staff, the students) has an effect on how confident and accepted lesbian and gay teachers feel. As has been shown, some have reported censorship or even discrimination. However, lesbian and gay staff can and do have an effect on schools, albeit on a smaller scale. Many of the respondents have experienced moments of personal triumph, whether this be helping students on a pastoral level, or helping break down stereotypes or fighting prejudice in the classroom.

### **4.6.2 Supporting pupils**

Several of the respondents were able to give examples of times when they were able to support pupils who identified as lesbian or gay. Sometimes they did this by outing themselves, and other times they remained slightly more distant, but were able to act as a critical friend on staff. It was assumed by the staff who were approached in this way, that even if they did not formally out themselves to the student, that both the pupil and teacher understood the situation to be one of inclusivity and acceptance.

Peter described an explicit conversation he had had with a year eleven student who was being bullied because of his sexuality. Peter reported that he had outed himself to the pupil and promised to make a special attempt to support the student as far as he was able in the context.

**PETER** During those two years, my first year I had a year 11 boy who was obviously being bullied, half way through the year he came out to me so I ... there was some homophobic bullying going on in my classroom without me realising and I thought, oh my God, so I came out to him and said "I'm really sorry I didn't realise, I promise you I will watch out for it and ..."

**MICHAEL** So you came out to a kid?

**PETER** Yeah.

**MICHAEL** And you said you would look after... try and ...

**PETER** Look out for him, try and spot any thing happening, got this kid thrown out of the class when the next thing happened.

Peter, ICT teacher. 25-04-2005

Paul experienced a similar situation when one of the sixth form came out to a straight colleague for support. Assuming that Paul wouldn't mind, the sixth former was directed to Paul for any additional support he may have required. Paul broached the subject with the sixth former to ensure that he felt able to talk to Paul if he needed to.

**PAUL** The closest it came was when this lad ... it's so good, this, isn't it? Sometimes your colleagues can be so professional. This lad, who was gay, went to the drama teacher and told her about it and she said 'oh go and talk to Mr Jameson, I think you might find you have a lot in common'. [laughs]

**MICHAEL** [laughs] Right.

**PAUL** He never did, although I sort of knew that this had been said and I did ...

**MICHAEL** So you were outed then, to a kid?

**PAUL** Well, yes I was I suppose really, and I did sort of say to him, I did pass him at the bottom of the stairs, 'if you want a chat, you know where I am', you know, but that was as far as it ever went, but I suppose he felt supported.

Paul, second in VI form. 2-4-2005

Fiona who is considering leaving the profession was happy that she had spent some time in teaching. She mentions her upper sixth group with whom she had a close relationship, several of whom she still keeps in touch with. She feels that she was able to provide a good role model in the way that the pupils came out after having seen an adult secure in their sexual identity, having come out to the group late on during the two year course.

**FIONA** I am glad I gave it [teaching] a shot and I know that I have made a big difference to a lot of kids, because there have been some gay kids as well who have come out having known me after they have been to uni and stuff and are still in touch with me, and that's really nice. A lot of them are doing their finals this year, it was my first ever upper sixth class and there are four of them who are gay in that class ..

Fiona, science teacher. 1-11-2004.

Some respondents found themselves able to support gay and lesbian students, but did not officially come out in the context of those conversations. Much of the time a strong bond had been created, and in many instances the pupil had correctly assumed the sexuality of the member of staff.

Alison mentions a difficult situation concerning a couple of students in a lesbian relationship. One of the students had a complex home background and behavioural issues. However, Alison developed a close working relationship with the pupil and was able to support her on a deeper level due to the empathy she was more easily able to show. Having had a conversation with an NQT in the staffroom about how to deal with two girls kissing at the back of the classroom, Alison says:

**ALISON** But I'm obviously very nonplussed by the whole idea of two girls kissing so I'm very much like ... And they never do it in front of me now. They tried it a couple of times and I just turned my back to them. And that was it. But she's quite a character. She's got a lot of issues at home in terms of she has had a father abandon her when she was a young child. And she has got issues with her work and she is really under achieving academically....

I now teach them both and I get on with this particular kid. Above anybody else in the whole school I have actually spent a bit of time with her and got to know her a bit and she has really, kind of, responded to me. Whether that's because she feels a bit of mutual empathy or whether that's because of anything I do in the classroom, I don't know. But quite recently we had ... well I had her on coursework detention and she just started talking to me and I couldn't stop her and she just obviously wanted somebody to chat to and went through everything from her father that abandoned her to the disaster in East Asia to how hard it's been for her in school in terms of coming out and coming out to her parents and how she feels that she is different, and all these sorts of issues. And I felt that it was one of the first times that I've been able to actually give some of my useful life experience and not advise but, sort of, help someone look at something from a different perspective and talk about something with actually some semblance of experience in that matter. So that was quite nice.

**MICHAEL** You didn't come out back to her?

**ALISON** No. I didn't. Because I was very, very close and I was, sort of the way that I was phrasing things was you know, well I find, and you will find and all this sort of stuff and not implicitly saying I am gay as well but it was, to anybody listening to the conversation it was very implicit. But she ... yes, it was just ... it was quite a positive experience I think as a teacher to do that and to go through that, so ...

Alison, maths teacher. 8-12-2004

Heather was also able to help a student by affirming lesbianism. Having developed a close relationship through participation in the Duke of Edinburgh scheme, the student wanted to disclose her sexuality to Heather. Again, a strong bond had been created and that either the student had correctly assumed that Heather was lesbian or knew that she was accepting of homosexuality. As mentioned above, Heather stated:

**HEATHER** And at the end of one evening, she used to stay back for a general chat sometimes anyway and she just said 'Miss, do you think there is anything wrong with being gay?' And I just said 'no, not at all.' And she said 'Oh well, I think I might be'. OK. We had a chat about it and she was after advice really as to who to get in touch with and what to do and how to go about, just finding people to support her really 'cos she felt her mum would be very very homophobic. I don't think she's out to her mum even still. She's now in the upper sixth.

Heather, second in Geography. 16-12-2004

Such moments where teachers were able to support and care for students are important features in the professional lives of the respondents. Many graduates enter the profession in order to be alongside pupils in their emotional



development, and these stories underline the small personal triumphs experienced by the interviewees.

#### **4.6.3 Student approach to the issue**

Several of the interviewees mentioned moments and situations where they experienced students with very positive and mature approaches to the issue of homosexuality. The respondents, having a closer than normal affinity to the issue than others, often felt that these moments were precious and worthy of sharing.

Lisa mentions a conversation with a group of her year eleven girls. They were required to bring a piece of non-fiction text to class for discussion. They brought their text to Lisa asking her to read it.

**LISA** So I read it and the headline was something like 'Football coach assaults other members of the team in homophobic attack'. 'Miss you read that and then we'll tell you what really happened'. So I read this article and there was a picture of the football coach who I didn't recognise at all but then there was two girls, one was 16 and one was 18 who I recognised from seeing in Newcastle, I'd seen them around. And these two girls were saying that this football coach had attacked them and it was because they were lesbians. And so I was reading through this article and it was really building it up at how within this football team these were being ostracised and the coach was not having any of this because they were lesbians and they were disrupting the team etc. And how it had all kicked off on a night out in Time Square, so it would be really strange if this woman was homophobic and was out in Time Square in Newcastle but had

kicked off and this coach had ended up head butting one of these girls and that was in the newspaper. And the two girls who were showing me this article were saying 'we're in this football team and we know this coach and we know these other two girls and these other two girls are awful they are always doing this and they are always doing the other and they are just, they are not accepted within the main bit of the team because they are always telling tales and name calling and back biting and bitching and that's why people don't like them and that's why the football coach had had a go at them because they were disrupting the rest of the team'. And the two girls were saying 'and it's absolutely ridiculous that they are saying she's homophobic, for God sake nearly every member of the team's a lesbian, it is a football team, come on'. And I was like 'right oh yeah' and I was looking at the picture thinking I know them two, I've seen them two around, and I'll see you two around pretty soon.

Lisa, English teacher. 2-10-2004

Lisa was impressed as to the level of understanding of the whole issue, as shown by their rejection of the article, and acceptance of sexuality; even if that included rejection of individuals because of their behaviour, not their sexuality. Thus, some students are reported to have verbally abused staff (chapter 4.4), but some pupils are reported to have shown a deep and subtle understanding of the issues surrounding differences in sexual orientation.

Julie experienced two moments where she was surprised and heartened by the views and openness of the pupils. She mentions hearing a group of students highlighting the advantages of having two mums over having a mum and a dad.

**JULIE** I did once overhear, when I was sitting in my classroom at lunchtime doing some marking, all the kids were in there and I did overhear some kids having

a conversation about how cool it would be to have two mums and how that would be so much cooler than a mum and a dad. And I thought that was amazing.

Julie, head of German. 11-05-2005

She also recalls a situation where she was teaching German names for family members and asked the pupils to write a short paragraph about their families. One of the students asked her how to say 'my Dad and his boyfriend' in German. Julie felt encouraged that the pupil felt secure enough with her and in her classroom to ask such a question.

**JULIE** ...but I have just now suddenly remembered on that issue that a pupil once ... when we were doing something about families and partners and so on ... a pupil did call me over very quietly in the middle of a lesson and say how do I say my dad and his boyfriend? And so he wanted to know if it would be 'Freund' or 'Freundin' for the boyfriend bit because I had just explained about 'Freund' and 'Freundin'

**MICHAEL** OK. So that's quite a statement for the kid to make.

**JULIE** It's quite a statement and actually I was very thrilled because I felt he, this pupil, obviously thought I was a teacher to whom he could ask that question.

Julie, head of German. 11-05-2005

Oliver who was changing school at the end of the year was seen by the brother of one of his students at a gay venue. It became known by the pupils that he was gay, yet he was impressed by the positive response of the students, even though expressed in a more colloquial style (his school was in a deprived area of the north-east). As mentioned above, Oliver states:

**OLIVER** But also the fact that I have been seen by kids on the gay scene and in speaking about that kids obviously realised I was gay and the kids were all really supportive. It was like 'canny'. 'So have you got a boyfriend Sir?' 'No, we are not going there, shut up'. There were a couple of the lads who were a bit 'So you are bent and that' and like yeah, pretty much. Then one of the lasses would generally come out with something like 'But he's no different it's the same guy!' Then they would all be like cool, mint!

Oliver, art teacher. 24-02-2005

Howard felt that his moments of triumph stem from times when he confronted verbal abuse from the students. He cites two occasions where attitudes were challenged at school, one with a lower school boy, and one with a member of his lower sixth group. In the former situation he approached a group of boys in the school yard while on duty after hearing some homophobic abuse shouted in his direction. He said:

**HOWARD** 'Everybody knows I am gay and I know I am gay so why are you shouting that out? You are just being abusive which is not acceptable', I said. 'But have you thought of the effect you might be having on some of your friends, colleagues who might be gay or wonder if they are gay, or be confused'. And he went 'Oh I hadn't thought of that'. He actually said 'I hadn't thought of that.'

Howard, assistant head. 16-01-2005

When talking to the sixth former, he outed himself, and the student was both surprised and remorseful.

**HOWARD** Again a nice lad, respected me, made daft comments and I stopped him at the end and said 'hey have you thought about what you are doing?' And again he

was mortified. I think he was surprised when I said well 'I'm gay and that's why I am telling you this'. Same reaction, I am sorry, I didn't think. So I hope I did good in the world.

Howard, assistant head. 16-01-2005

For Howard, these moments of triumph stem from situations where he showed a level of bravery in dealing with the issue head on. These moments show situations where gay staff were able to have a positive effect on reducing intolerance within the institution.

#### **4.6.4 Staff reaction**

In general, interviewees reported only a small amount of difficulty from members of staff. Many feel accepted and supported, and all have felt able to make friends on staff. Paul, in particular, mentions a moment when a member of his department, who he had wrongly assumed to be homophobic, revealed his respect for Paul as a practitioner and showed no interest in sexuality as a discriminatory issue.

PAUL            Well, yes. I subsequently discovered that the head of geography had worked it out for himself and he had taken the other guy from the department into his room at some stage, which must have been considerably earlier on in the year, and said to him 'Look I don't give a shit what his sexuality is, he's a bloody good geography teacher, right!'

Paul, second in VI form. 2-4-2005

Some of the respondents said they experienced full support from their management teams in times of difficulty or homophobia. This attitude together with the implementation of practical strategies has been encouraging and helpful to the staff involved. Howard was experiencing some abusive phone calls from someone who claimed to be a former pupil. The abuse ended fairly quickly, but he was given support of management.

HOWARD        It was somebody who claimed to be an old pupil, being abusive over the phone. And it was a one night sort of thing.

MICHAEL       Homophobia was it?

HOWARD        Oh yes. It was oh you dirty whatsit fucking bastard ..... you queer bastard. That sort of thing and it went on all night.

MICHAEL        Right.

HOWARD        So I went in to say at school I've had this and it implied it was an old pupil. This is, what was the expression they used, pay back time or something.

MICHAEL        Right.

HOWARD        But in fact it stopped but I told the deputy head and he was fine because he said if there is anything we can do ... we can't do anything without more information. But in fact it stopped.

Howard, assistant head. 16-01-2005

In a similar way, Tony explained that he was experiencing abuse from a former lover. He was threatened with being outed to the whole school community, and so he took the issue up with the head teacher. He said that the head teacher was both supportive and decisive in her actions.

TONY            After I came out I had a very, very brief fling with somebody who lives just very, very near where I work, knew where I worked. I'd known him quite well and I

knew that he was gay and he was actually the only fully on gay man I'd ever known.... anyway, it ended up and he went psycho on me

**MICHAEL** What's that?

**TONY** He went psycho on me, very, very controlling and possessive and writing me letters saying, you know, ... Anyway I got a letter off him so I wrote to him and said I am sorry I've upset you, I didn't mean to do anything like that but, you know, understand I don't want to have anything to do with you. So I got this other letter back saying I know where you work, I am coming to your school, I'm going to out you to everybody. So I went to the head and said 'Oh my God what do I do, what do I do?' And she said 'right I'll tell you what we'll do'. She phoned the police and she got South Tyneside's top homophobic crime officer to come and talk to me and she gave me her office for two hours, she vacated her office and this guy sat down, calmed me down, talked to me and said don't go near him or, you know, and it all sorted, it all stopped. You know, but she sorted it out for me.

Tony, head of MFL. 16-06-2005

On the other hand, yet still positive, were times when respondents felt some form of discrimination from staff and confronted it. In these cases, the decisive actions of the teacher had a positive net result.

Chris, who was out on staff but worked under an evangelical Christian head teacher reportedly well known for his anti-gay stance, challenged him when he was not being promoted internally despite being, in Chris's opinion, the better candidate. The head gave advice but Chris remained under-promoted (in his view) at that school. Within two years at his new school he was promoted internally to the rank of deputy head.

**CHRIS** Yes I did actually. Because I think there were jobs that I went for that, I think on paper I was experienced, I was the best candidate but it wasn't until I actually challenged him as to why I wasn't getting promoted ...

**MICHAEL** Right. So you went for a few jobs and didn't get them? And then you asked why?

**CHRIS** Yes as to why I wasn't the candidate that was appointed. And really said how can I be appointed? You know, if the next job was going to be everything that he had told me and then when I went for my next interview he said look, this is what I've done, this is what you told me to do, this is what I've done. You know. Come on

Chris, deputy head. 10-04-2005

Indeed at his current school, Chris, as a member of the senior leadership team, made it clear in a briefing how homophobia was not acceptable on staff, thus aligning himself to gay rights, and was nevertheless promoted again. In a whole school briefing where the deputy head was bringing the team together using humour, she sparked off a discussion where homophobic remarks were made.

**CHRIS** The head did her bit. The deputy did the briefing and said I would like to congratulate this member of staff on his sartorial elegance.

**MICHAEL** On his sartorial elegance? Right.

**CHRIS** Because he is known as a scruffy bugger, and he said 'what does that mean' and one of the teachers turned round and said 'you look like a puff'. At this point everybody laughed. And I wasn't prepared to stand there and accept that so I said 'excuse me, I find that offensive. Because someone is dressed smart what has that got to do with their sexuality and I would like you to apologize for that remark?'

**MICHAEL** And this is in the full staff briefing?

**CHRIS** Yes, in the full staff briefing.

**MICHAEL** OK

**CHRIS** Which he looked at me, went red and said, 'well I'm sorry I didn't know I'd



offended somebody.' I said, 'well you offended me'. And that was that.

Chris, deputy head. 10-04-2005

From the perspective of a head teacher, Simon refused to accept that his sexuality had a direct effect on the inclusivity of his school. However, he noted with a smile that his interpretation of local authority policy may be fairer than that of other head teachers. In this way, his personal triumph of reaching headship as a gay man can be subtly used for fighting discrimination.

**MICHAEL** Do you think that because you're gay and can see that discrimination occurs, that your employment policies are more fair than other places?

**SIMON** No because my employment policies aren't mine, they are the county's.

**MICHAEL** So where...?

**SIMON** My interpretation of them might be fairer than some others.

Simon, head teacher. 15-01-2005

#### **4.6.5 The positive impact of out students on staff**

Some stories were told that indicate that it is not always the gay staff that are able to support or encourage the gay students. Jonathan was encouraged when one student purposefully chose him to be the first person outside college to whom he disclosed his sexuality. At this time Jonathan was not out, and the bravery of the young man began to have an effect on the way Jonathan dealt with his own issues.

**JONATHAN** And I had a letter from him and he wrote and said, "I would like to tell you you are the first person outside people at the college who know I'm gay." And he explained the background to it. I had never guessed when he was at school that he was gay and he mentioned other people that he knew at school who were gay and I'd never guessed about them either so... if gaydar<sup>16</sup> works it doesn't work with me. And he hadn't told his parents.

Jonathan, deputy head. 10-10-2004

Emily experienced a greater level of bravery when a year eight student came out in front of the whole class in an English lesson. Having experienced some level of abuse at school for his effeminate mannerisms and since everyone at school assumed he was gay, he decided to confront the issue head on.

**EMILY** Well, we were doing some presentation actually, he just sort of, he just said... he was being... he was really camping it up for his presentation was you know he was doing like all these dance moves for his presentation and I was looking at him thinking "God you're so gay" and he just sort of went "yeah, of course I'm gay" like that and just said that in front of everybody and I looked round for a reaction thinking "I can't believe he just said that" and then I waited for him to say "I'm joking" or something, but no, he said "no I am" and after the lesson I kept him behind and I said "Are you alright?" and he sort of just said "yeah, but I'm gay, I'm gay, all my friends know at school, the girls I hang around with" and I said "OK I wasn't expecting that for the time you told everybody". We kind of laughed about it in a way.

Emily, second in English. 4-10-2004

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<sup>16</sup> See Glossary of specialist vocabulary, p. 10.

Ruth, who is out to the students at her school, engaged in 'regular banter' with a gay member of her tutor group. Ruth perceives that the group accepted him, and he played up to the group. Ruth indicates that the environment was inclusive and that the joking in the class was friendly rather than hostile. This is an important distinction; the same incident could be seen as discriminatory by others, however.

RUTH I am trying to think of things they have said – things like when I am counting how many girls and how many, you know somebody will come in and say how many boys and how many girls have you got in the class and I tot them up or something like that and I go well I have got 14 boys and 16 girls and they go '17 girls miss, you forgot [laughs] ... you forgot about Dan'. Really. And he goes, 'honestly' [camp voice].

MICHAEL [laughs]

RUTH And things like that. And I don't know. You see that makes me laugh because I don't find it particularly threatening. I don't think Dan finds it particularly threatening and it's done on a sort of, you know, ... they all laugh.

Ruth, second in History. 18-03-2005

When Simon was head of sixth form one of the students decided to complete his work experience for the media group that produces the gay male lifestyle magazine *Attitude* and ended up on the front cover of one of the issues. No-one else on the pastoral team was told that *Attitude* was a gay magazine, but Simon found this humorous in addition to his expressive costume at the sixth form ball:

SIMON When I was head of sixth form the last head boy that we had was gay and

he did his work experience in a really good work experience programme and they could go anywhere they wanted ... and this lad from a big Catholic family and all had been through school and his sister worked in London at the time and he got himself onto the front of a London magazine, and we got a letter from *Attitude* [laughs] I was just creased up because nobody else knew what it was 'oh right, that's fine. Off you go.' And then he turned up at the Leavers' Ball dressed as a fairy and all these other gay lads were dressed as fairies. That was very entertaining.

Simon, head teacher. 15-01-2005

#### **4.6.6 Gay venues**

Several of the respondents reported having met students at gay venues, mostly once the students had left school. As a rule, the interviewees described these as positive experiences.

Paul remembers being approached by an RAF (Royal Air Force) serviceman in a gay club, and thinking 'that his luck was in'.

**PAUL** ...and there was this lad stood by the bar and I thought he's all right. And he sort of looked back at me and I looked at him, and he looked back at me and smiled and I thought blimey this is going well for saying that I have only just got in here, particularly when he came over to talk to me. I thought Mmm. And he said 'you don't remember me do you?' And I said 'no I don't' and he told me his name and he said 'you taught me in years 8 and 9' and I remember teaching him in years 8 and 9 and he certainly was the little fat boy, he was not the gorgeous RAF serviceman that was stood in front of me now.... Yes, so that was quite a funny one. But no, the times have always

been very positive and, you know, we have had a good chat.

Paul, second in VI form. 2-4-2005

Chris met one man after he had left sixth form who gave him very positive feedback about his time at school. Due to Chris's inclusive stance in the classroom the man felt secure as a gay teenager, and encouraged Chris by giving him positive feedback.

**CHRIS** One was quite interesting when I spoke to him on the scene after he had left because he said to me, he said, 'when I was in your lesson', he said 'no-one could ever make a comment or say anything about me because if anyone made one comment you were renowned. If anyone made any comment black, white anything, you were known at the school that you would have them', he said 'and I never got any bother when I was in your lesson'. Which I thought was really nice.

Chris, deputy head. 10-04-2005

Emily was spotted at a gay pride event by a gay member of the sixth form. She was slightly worried about being outed to the students, but the sixth former could see the difficult position Emily was in, and maturely dealt with the situation, which both helped her and encouraged her.

**EMILY** So there were kids there, only one of them I think is gay, I don't know about the other three, I think they were his fag bangle or vice versa and he was just lovely and he made a point and came up later just as it was ending and came over and said "Miss I want you to know that this would never be discussed or anything at school it's your business the same as this is my business." Although he's openly gay at school. "But I don't want you to

think this will be gossip when you get back to school" which we thought was really nice of him to do that

Emily, second in English. 4-10-2004

Howard's experience seemed to mirror that of many of the respondents, when they are seen at a gay venue by a present or former student. Howard chatted to the pupil, shared stories and offered support if required.

HOWARD That was it, I mean, in fact here's an idea straight away I walked into the Heavens Above [gay bar] and then against the bar was one of my old pupils who straight away greeted me and I said 'how lovely to see you, you know, and here's my number if you want someone to have a drink with sometime and don't worry, you know, we've all been there' [laughs].

Howard, assistant head. 16-01-2005

#### **4.6.7 Critical discussion**

All of the stories and memories reported here tell of personal triumphs are small scale and often on an individual basis. However, in supporting pupils, receiving encouragement back from the students, and in winning battles over homophobic attitudes whether from students or staff, respondents felt some control and experienced triumph in this way. Many of the respondents felt positive support from staff when required also.

As seen above (chapter 4.2) daily life for gay teachers at school is often free from prejudice or intolerance, certainly from other members of staff, and this is also to be seen as encouraging and a triumph over intolerance and disrespect. In small ways teachers are battling against some of the intolerance found within educational institutions.

These small moments of triumph are largely absent from the literature. In larger quantitative work, some reference is made to the absence of homophobia for example, Irwin (2002) based in Australia, where 41% of respondents did not report any negative experiences at all (see chapter 2.2.3). On occasion, teachers are quoted as having experienced no problems at all at work in the UK (for example, Powney et al, where a colleague is cited as saying that he had found 'colleagues to be open, honest and respectful' (2003: 36)). However, within the cognate, qualitative literature few positive experiences are reported. On occasion, improvements in levels of discrimination with experience and length of service are reported (Squires and Sparkes 1996), and in his autoethnographic account of his experiences Vicars (2006) does mention some positive experiences within a homophobic environment. However, positive experiences were reported only on occasion.

Although these personal triumphs are small scale, so too are some of the reported incidents of homophobia. This study, therefore, challenges the notion that the only relationship between the institution and the individual is negative.

Some teachers challenge the system with success, and experience a level of integration (rather than separation (Griffin 1992, see chapter 2.4.6)) of their sexuality and work life.



## On teaching and learning

**ALISON** It's quite funny that when one of my friends actually watching a programme on the holocaust for school and you know how often holocaust issues focus on the Jewish aspect and they often at the end of a holocaust issue programme play you some haunting kind of violin Jewish-type music and [laughs] and said 'well that was a good programme but you know what? So many million gay people died in the holocaust and they never play YMCA at the end of these programmes'. And it is a point that they kind of do ignore that. It was six million Jews and a few gays!

Alison, maths teacher. 8-12-2004

## **4.7 On teaching and learning**

### **4.7.1 Introduction**

Although some interviewees reported homophobia or discrimination in the classroom, they sometimes felt able to redress the balance to a certain extent by promoting tolerance and understanding around issues of homosexuality in their classrooms.

The main responsibility of teachers is in the classroom. Therefore the greatest effect that teachers will have is either directly (as in junior members of staff) or indirectly (as leaders of learning or senior management) in the classroom. The respondents mentioned teaching and learning throughout their interviews and three themes emerged in as far as direct classroom input is concerned:

- **Inclusive classrooms;** much discussion was had as to whether or not the sexuality and past experiences of the interviewees had an effect on how inclusive they sought their classrooms to be, and indeed whether their classrooms were more inclusive than other teachers in the school.
- **Approaching the syllabus;** some respondents mentioned the fact that their subject area mentioned the subject of sexuality as part of the syllabus, and how they felt about this, and how they approached the issue in the classroom.

Some respondents had experience of sex education in this light, and commented on its content.

- **Queering<sup>17</sup> the curriculum;** some teachers used their inclusive approach to include the issue of homosexuality when possible, in order to break down barriers and stereotypes. In these cases a certain responsibility was felt to normalise different sexualities as part of the wider education of the students.

#### **4.7.2 Inclusive Classrooms**

Several of the respondents cite their sexuality as being a reason for their desire for all students to feel safe and included in their classroom. This desire to care for the feelings of others when racism, sexism, disability discrimination or homophobia is heard or experienced is presumably due to a sense of justice that they desire for themselves and others in society. Emily recognises exactly this feeling in herself when she says:

**EMILY**      Actually yeah, that's quite interesting because I do feel that like being gay myself has made me a lot more determined not to accept any kind of bullying within my classroom and to make everyone feel that they are part of the class and I think, I'm generalising again, but I think that probably is quite common to most teachers who self define as gay or lesbian.

Emily, second in English. 4-10-2004

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<sup>17</sup> See Glossary of specialist vocabulary, p. 10.

Similarly, James understands his desire to make sure that everyone feels valued, supported and safe could come from his sexuality.

**JAMES** I think it's one of the gay sensibilities maybe, to be sensitive to how people feel in a social environment that you know perhaps the other male teachers don't have that attribute to the same degree.

James, head of music. 14-04-2005

Ruth, who defines herself as both Jewish and lesbian, also feels that the issues of discrimination that she has encountered are an impetus for her inclusive stance in the classroom, where she seeks to make her learning environment one where everyone feels safe.

**RUTH** I think because I'm gay and the other thing that I ram down the kids throats' is that I am Jewish and I think the Jewishness comes in... So I'm always quite firm about that and yes ... so I don't tolerate discrimination in my classroom in any way and I think the kids know that. You know, I won't have any discrimination of any ... if it raises its head in my classroom in a public situation I'll challenge it all the time. Whether that's race or religion or ethnicity or whatever, you know, or homophobia really, and I do challenge. But I am not sure how it's treated in other classrooms. As a teacher it's quite a sort of private environment really in some ways, you don't really know what goes on in other people's classrooms.

Ruth, second in History. 18-03-2005

Fiona also feels that her sexuality makes her classroom a more inclusive place, although she also mentions the fact that the staffroom in this particular private

school has a sexist and homophobic tone. Fiona focuses on her care and interest for every member of the teaching group, not only the most intelligent.

**MICHAEL** Because I was thinking, do you think that your classroom is, therefore, a safer place for children ...

**FIONA** Absolutely, and more inclusive

**MICHAEL** Because...

**FIONA** Because I am determined to make it that way. I am determined to make it a place where the important thing is putting your hand up not whether you get the right answer. It doesn't matter whether you are the kid who always get an A or you are the one who always gets a D, you know you're treated equally well.

Fiona, science teacher. 1-11-2004

Chris, as school leader, also aligns his school vision to his own experiences and wants the school he leads to be one which accepts every member of the community.

**MICHAEL** And do you think, when you think of your vision for your school when you moved to it that this equality is one of your hallmarks of your vision for your school, do you think? Because you have talked quite strongly about it in relation to your own experiences.

**CHRIS** I would like it to be inclusive. My vision of my school is an inclusive school which accepts every member of our community and not just the best.

Chris, deputy head. 10-04-2005

Simon feels uncomfortable expressing the fact that he feels his work in making his school an inclusive community is due in part to his sexuality, and produces a

more oblique answer when asked directly, but his meaning comes across in context.

**MICHAEL** [laughs] Do you think your school is more inclusive than other schools because you're gay?

**SIMON** I think my school is very inclusive. That's a bit of a fudged answer and part of me being gay.

**MICHAEL** Well, it's an answer.

Simon, head teacher. 15-01-2005

Not all of the respondents believed that they were the only members of staff in search of a totally inclusive environment in their school or classroom. Some interviewees mentioned the fact that there were other members of staff who they felt also held inclusivity as a core value in their teaching. Oliver who experienced some difficulty with male members of staff in his first school cites his female friends on staff as also being inclusive.

**OLIVER** No. I wouldn't have said so to be honest. I would have said it's equally as inclusive as a lot of the others. I mean I think there are probably teachers that are less inclusive than me but I would have said that I'm about as inclusive as say like any other member of staff. Probably more likely to be as inclusive as a female member of staff as opposed to a male member of staff.

Oliver, art teacher. 24-02-2005

In a similar way, Heather believes that there are members of staff who also foster a respect for all in their classroom as she does, and that this is to do with the type

of person she is and the values she holds dear, rather than being linked to her sexuality per se. As in the case for role models, this shows a deep understanding of the issues and a level of self-reflection. The perspectives of teachers in schools are complex and varied.

**HEATHER** But I don't know because my belief is that the main thing to be fostering in the classroom is respect for each other and each other's ideas and opinions and I don't think that's got anything to do with my sexuality. And I know that there are friends of mine within the school who feel exactly the same perhaps there's issues that get discussed more openly in my room because of the nature of the subject and the fact that I do encourage questions but I don't think that that is anything to do with my sexuality.

Heather, second in Geography. 16-12-2004

Joan voices the opinion of several of the interviewees, often those who consider sexuality as primarily a private affair. She does not think her sexuality makes any difference in the way she deals with pupils at all; she treats all pupils professionally and with respect because this is what is appropriate for school practitioners.

**MICHAEL** Do you think that your classroom or your unit is a safer place for children and more inclusive because of your stance on gay issues?

**JOAN** I don't think it makes any difference to be honest.

**MICHAEL** Doesn't make any difference.

**JOAN** No, I don't think it does.

Joan, special needs. 12-01-2005

Thus, although many of the respondents had a desire to make their classrooms inclusive environments, there was a difference in opinion about why this was the case. Some believed that it was a desire for justice stemming from their own experiences as gay men and lesbians, but others indicated that inclusivity was an ideal that many teachers believed in.

### **4.7.3 Approaching the syllabus**

When issues around homosexuality appear in the syllabus or scheme of work, interviewees responded in one of two ways: either they seemed defensive about their own position, hoping that the pupils would not see how uncomfortable they were, or they were content and relaxed talking about the issues, without necessarily giving personal anecdotes.

Two of the interviewees teach English up to and including A2 level (final year A level exams taken at 18). Lisa teaches both *Oranges are not the only fruit* and *The Colour Purple*, both novels with a primarily lesbian focus, and states that both she and the class treat the novels in a very mature and open way, even when more explicit scenes are being discussed. She says:

LISA            We've been reading this novel and teaching it since September so by this point they know both the novels we're doing *Oranges are not the only fruit* and *The Colour Purple* and the main theme of the novel is lesbianism and how the better relations are between women and the kids were talking very openly and maturely



about that and there are parts of the novel which we've read out which are quite sexual as well which we try and read it being really cool and I'm like "yeah, yeah OK, then Shug did this".

Lisa, English teacher. 2-10-2004

Emily also teaches novels with a gay theme to sixth form classes, and again the issues are dealt with in an open and mature manner, and Emily does not feel pressure or embarrassment when approaching the texts.

EMILY I am at the moment in a way, I'm teaching *Enduring Love*, novel in year 12 and there's a character in that book there who is classed as a gay lover, he's got a mental illness. So we've touched on it but nothing major. I've touched on it more when I did year 13 war literature. We looked at the Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. And the gay issues that came up through the war literature and the students picked up on that, but that all seemed OK.

Emily, second in English. 4-10-2004

Chris, when teaching an optional course in the business and vocational education department, needed to cover discrimination at work and consider equal opportunity policy with the group. He felt more uncomfortable when dealing with the sexuality issue, but was able to detach himself and look at the case studies in an objective manner.

CHRIS ... Because you have to do all the equal opportunity policies and how you can't discriminate. When it started getting to sexuality I felt nerved by doing this because I thought oh my God, am I getting too emotional here and trying to still remain the ultimate professional? I was ... every lesson was going to be different, different issues on equality including a gay and

lesbian one, and issues on how minorities feel and looking from a third person. I said right, get on, and I walked out the room to sort out a red card call [discipline issue]. As I walked out of the room to go downstairs I heard one of them say 'eh, he knows a lot about that, doesn't he?'

Chris, deputy head. 10-04-2005

Oliver is happy to mention all influences that have had effects on artists and their work.

**OLIVER** Oh yeah. I mean I've covered sort of stuff like that. I mean if I think a piece of art work is relevant to their project I'll introduce them to that piece of art work regardless as to whether there is feminist, lesbian, gay, whatever imagery going on.

Oliver, art teacher. 24-02-2005

In as far as teaching sex education is concerned, several of the respondents did not feel comfortable talking about any of the issues that fall into this area of the curriculum, and many had no experience of this aspect of school life at all. Mark, for example, did not feel comfortable talking about such personal issues with the pupils, and identified himself as someone who gets embarrassed easily, and someone who would refuse to teach sex education if he were asked.

**MARK** I just refused to do it. But I think I wouldn't be very happy about having to teach sex education.

**MICHAEL** Is that because of gay issues or because just because you don't want to?

**MARK** Nothing to do with gay issues really. I just think I'd find the subject very embarrassing to talk about.

For example I remember, it was only last year or the year before last, I went into a science room to speak to a colleague of mine. It is probably

the colleague I get on best with of all the staff, a really nice woman, and she is a biology teacher and as I went in she happened to be teaching the kids about the urethra tube [laughs] and she had this picture of this huge penis on her blackboard and was pointing out to the kids as I walked in the door where the tube was. And as I walked in the door she just said 'here's Mr Harvey he'll know all about the urethra tube'. And I went so red and thought it was such a funny thing but that's just typical of me so I just couldn't teach anything like that, I couldn't I know for a fact I couldn't.

Mark, SENCO. 4-04-2005

Of those interviewed who had knowledge of or experience in teaching sex education at school only two schools dealt with homosexuality within that aspect of the curriculum. At Morgan's school there is a chance to discuss the issue in year eight, and to explore the feelings and reactions of gay men and lesbians in society.

**MORGAN** Yeah, the sex ed policy does include a small area where homosexuality is introduced to children, or aspects of homosexuality, in particular in PSE lessons in year 8 the children have the opportunity to talk and to discuss about gay relationships. It's usually introduced by allowing the children to see it at a soap with a gay character in, then they are given the chance to match different terms used for gay issues, straight issues to ... and what they mean and then we talk about how people who are gay might be feeling and how people should react towards them.

Morgan, assistant head. 23-01-2005

Ruth has experience of teaching sex education and notes that the mechanics of gay sex are mentioned at KS4 (curriculum studied at ages 14-16). From

previous quotes it is evident that Ruth's school is a particularly liberal institution. In addition to this she talks about the equality unit in the PSE curriculum.

**MICHAEL** Do you know if gay sex appears in the sex education?

**RUTH** Yes, it does. And although we danced quite carefully around it ... I did teach it ... we danced quite carefully around it, it's in the .... I've never done the sex ed in year 10. It doesn't much come into the sex ed in year 9 but it's about ... there's a race equality unit and homosexuality comes into that.

**MICHAEL** And that's about discrimination issues?

**RUTH** It's about discrimination issues, yes. And it does come into the sexuality thing and the head of citizenship is a good friend of mine and she's pretty on the ball about stuff like that and was actually confronted by ... a lot of lesbian parents that I know, that quite often happens in parents' evening when I see parents coming in, sort of lesbian couples, whose children are at our school, who I know.

Ruth, second in History. 18-03-2005

Chris notes that in his school gay sex is not mentioned within the sex education policy, but that contact numbers are available in the student planner for pupils who feel they need access to support services.

**CHRIS** Actually yes we did because in our contact planner there's the young men's gay group contact number.

Chris, deputy head. 10-04-2005

It is to be underlined, however, that most respondents had little experience or even working knowledge of sex education within their schools.

### **4.7.3 Queering the curriculum**

In addition to opportunities within the policies and schemes of work of individual schools to approach the issues surrounding homosexuality, several of the respondents made an attempt to queer the curriculum through their teaching. Finding opportunities to address the issue in order to combat misunderstandings and latent homophobic attitudes was a feature of the interviewees who are more confident or up-front about their sexuality. Here, the idea of normalising gay men and lesbians through highlighting them wherever possible in the curriculum was common.

James is not open about his sexuality at school and is easily embarrassed. Even so, he broached the issue with his year ten group when Tchaikovsky was being studied, and he managed to keep his composure. Thus, although he found the situation difficult, he wanted to widen the pupils' understanding of issues linked to sexuality.

**JAMES** I have done with one or two, like Tchaikovsky, did mention with my year 10s that he is gay and

**MICHAEL** Did you go all red at that moment?

**JAMES** No, I managed just about to keep my composure, and I said that people may think that that's the reason why he committed suicide because at the time he couldn't be gay and you know there was a lot of prejudice around. So I did talk about that a little bit, amazingly.

James, head of music. 14-04-2005

Ruth, being open about her sexuality with the students, does not find it difficult to mention gay issues when teaching. Indeed, she indicates that whenever she can go some way to highlighting gay issues, she grasps the opportunity.

**RUTH** Um, yes, I do James I who was homosexual and I make it quite plain that James I was gay and that he favoured his favourites, the Duke of Buckingham. The kids all find that hilarious and call him Queen James I and I also deal with it when I do the holocaust, I always include the other factors apart from the Jewish elements and talk about homosexuality in there, and do I cover it in any other way? If I can slip it in anywhere, mind, I'll slip it in.

Ruth, second in History. 18-03-2005

Paul remembers the time when he added the fight for lesbian and gay rights to the list of peoples who have fought for equality through history. Although this seems like a small detail on the surface, this comment was made at the school where the head teacher was perceived to be homophobic and destroyed a sixth form display that gave numbers of support services for pupils dealing with difficult issues, including sexuality. Paul saw this action as a direct result of the head teacher's homophobic attitude (chapter 4.3).

**PAUL** I remember queering up the history curriculum once when I was teaching history and we were talking about protests in history and I remember giving an interview to the *Journal* where I mentioned that I had talked about, you know, various people protesting for various things and I mentioned lesbian and gay rights as being one of those.

Paul, second in VI form. 2-4-2005

Julie who has taught languages and is now a part-time author tells of two instances where she has tried to normalise gay men and lesbians in the eyes of the learners. In the classroom when dealing with the topic of friends and family, she adds sentences and phrases that give the pupils access to the language they need if they have same-sex couples in the family.

**JULIE** Yes, so I addressed at A level and below that ... I've sort of taken the chance to, for example, with German endings, gender specific endings, point finding boyfriend, girlfriend or partner ... I've just made the point ... when I have been giving little illustrative sentences on the board whatever, I have included ones that could be a bit ambiguous or possibly referring to same sex couples or just sort of tossed in little things without specifically making a big issue of it.

Julie, head of German. 11-05-2005

In her work as an author, Julie is having a small effect on teaching and learning at a national level. In one of her A level texts she approaches the issue of discrimination and tolerance of gay men and lesbians.

**JULIE** Yes, slightly, at A level. I wrote an A level text book and I put something in there. I forget the specific issue but I made sure, for example, that in a chapter about relationships I made sure I included a same sex couple amongst the couples featured. And I included, I also included something about the Berlin love parade and included the fact that as well as other groups that's a sort of gay rights event. So I made a conscious effort in that way and then used that book in my teaching and included those

issues in

Julie, head of German. 11-05-2005

#### **4.7.5 Critical discussion**

All of the published literature in this area reports the difficulties that gay men and lesbians experience working within educational institutions. Where no difficulties are found, this is occasionally reported as support and acceptance within the staffroom or wider school environment. None of the literature seeks to describe the positive effects of gay men and lesbians within the classroom; interviewees in this project have reported areas in which they have had a positive effect on teaching and learning within their institutions. Where published literature tends to focus only on difficulties, the different and positive perspectives that gay men and lesbians can offer in the classroom seems invisible.

The effect of gay men and lesbians in the classroom is varied and wide ranging. On occasions issues have been raised that other members of staff may not have highlighted, but in as far as direct effect on curriculum areas is concerned, apart from some staff feeling embarrassed, little difference is discernable. However, there is an underlying desire for inclusivity among gay and lesbian teachers that may be replicated among straight teachers, but seems pronounced and noteworthy among gay staff. Some staff have reported going further than this by



seeking out moments and areas of the curriculum where misunderstandings and prejudice can be combated, with the idea of normalizing gay men and lesbians through highlighting them wherever possible in the curriculum.

Further research into the positive influence of gay and lesbian teaching staff in schools is required. Most published studies highlight the difficulties encountered by staff, and as has been shown in this project (chapter 4.5 and 4.6) positive experiences also exist. However, the further issue of what positive influences gay men and lesbians can actively bring to their schools needs attention also. Some of these positive influences have been identified in this study.

## **5.1 Critical discussion**

This researcher aligns himself to the theoretical perspectives as outlined by Foster et al (1996), in that research must remain neutral; value judgements and fact are different. No research can bring value consensus, and thus sociological research is restricted to the production of descriptions, explanations and theories (see chapter 3.2). A sharp distinction between the orientation of the policymaker and researcher exists. In addition, much sociological research takes place where the focus is situationally located and is revealed to be complex. All action, both macro and micro, is contextualised and effected by 'contingent and changing interrelationships' (Foster et al 1996: 32). The research presented here does not seek to change policy, but rather to offer more information and refine theory in order that policymakers may base any changes in practice on well grounded research.

Having conducted both a literature review and research into press articles it became clear that the field of literature in this area is comparatively small. Much work published in the area either aims to raise the issue of homosexuality in schools without claiming to be for an exclusively academic audience (Epstein (1994), Jennings and Kissen (1994) for example) or aims to contribute to policy development and changes in practice within educational institutions (Ferfolja (1998), Nixon and Givens (2004) for example). Where published work is close to this current project in terms of substantive area or methodology it is to be noted

that conclusions reached are mostly negative and seek to underline the difficulties that gay and lesbian teachers face (Nixon and Givens (2004), Squires and Sparkes (1996), Clarke (1998) for example, see chapter 2.5). This research would support many of the claims made about types of negative experience reported, but also challenges the near uniformly negative perception of the experiences of gay and lesbian teachers as presented in the literature.

This project interviewed twenty teachers who define as gay or lesbian in the North-east of England. All have very different experiences of both their sexuality and their career. However, strong themes emerged when attempting to identify the effect that schools have on the individual practitioners and the effect that the teachers can have on the school, and in particular if this relationship was overwhelmingly negative. Grounded Theory was used as a tool to analyse the interviews. The consistency between this theory and both the sociological perspective of the researcher and methodological tool supported this choice of method (chapter 3.2 and 3.6.3).

The extent to which individual teachers disclose their sexuality plays a pivotal role in their opinions and experiences. Griffin (1992) offers a model which has been helpful to this project, on which teachers are placed on a continuum from complete secrecy to being out to the whole school community. Although the model put forward by Griffin (1992) is helpful as an initial framework, it is could also be seen as deficient in describing the complexities of disclosure of sexuality.

It does not allow for differences in level of disclosure depending upon age and length of time the person has accepted their own sexual identity. It does not allow for changes in level of disclosure when changing work place. In particular, there is no difference in category or continuum between level of disclosure to the student body and teaching staff.

Furthermore, the model does not allow for the difference in rate of disclosure to pupils of the same sexuality as opposed to straight pupils. Many of the respondents who were 'out to staff but more distant in the classroom' disclosed their sexuality explicitly (or all but disclosed their sexuality) to gay or lesbian students in an attempt to support them. Here, a small number of pupils will have been aware of the teacher's sexual orientation, in situations where it would have been highly unlikely that the pupils would have shared this information with their peers for fear of them outing themselves.

Fraynd and Capper (2003), when interviewing school leaders about their sexuality, cite Griffin's four protection strategies used by teachers to support them if their sexuality were to be disclosed (chapter 2.4.6). In a similar way, teachers in this study (Paul, Simon and James) have sought to develop a reputation as excellent teachers or leaders in order to protect themselves when they disclose their sexuality, or if they were to be outed. For those in the study who were concerned about revealing their sexuality, regulation of action and demeanour, and separation of school and home life were also in evidence. This

supports the work and conclusions of Griffin (1992) and Fraynd and Capper (2003).

The level of disclosure to the staff was high. Fourteen of the twenty teachers interviewed were out to the teaching body at their school; only three were closeted due to fear or perceptions of difficulty. Although this is not a representative sample, this would indicate a certain level of acceptance among professionals, even if on occasion some difficulties were met. The level of worry and fear as expressed by interviewees in other projects (Epstein 1997, Ferfolija 2005, Clarke 1998) was not replicated by most of the interviewees here, although consideration was often given as to when to come out and who to come out to, mirroring Squires and Sparkes' assertion that 'although many teachers do not experience homophobia, the anticipation of such [can cause] considerable anxiety' (1996: 83). As has been noted, the extent of disclosure is pivotal to the experiences of the staff. Staff who were out to the whole school community had different views and different experiences in as far as talking to pupils and acting as a role model is concerned from staff who were completely closeted at school. Although obvious, it is clear in this study that this is the case.

Negative experiences were reported and indicate that the lives of gay and lesbian teachers can be difficult at times. In a similar way to experiences reported by Clarke (1998) and Squires and Sparkes (1996), interviewees indicated that they, as gay staff, censor themselves in as far as coming out is concerned, and also in

respect of posts for which they apply. This is also mentioned by key respondents in Warwick et al (2004). This study supports the conclusions made by these researchers.

A certain amount of self-censorship was also reported having a direct effect on classroom practice and pastoral support because of different understandings and interpretation of Section 28. Indeed, the opinions and actions of the staff were worthy of comment due to their breadth; some acted very carefully for fear of what pressure Section 28 could put them under, others ignored it. Even the reported actions of management lead to a confused picture. This would support Epstein (2000) and Moran (2001) in their conclusions underlining the misunderstanding and confusion that existed in schools because of Section 28, and that continues to exist to a certain extent after its repeal. Respondents in this study highlighted not only the effect of Section 28 on themselves as practitioners, but also on the effects on the pupils; pastoral support and teaching and learning were effected in some cases, according to the interviewees.

The more subtle form of censorship, that of heterosexism is largely absent from the literature. Respondents reported that the prevailing heterosexual model in society causes them difficulty; so does the constant need to come out, the constant state of challenging heteronormative models in the workplace. In schools where teachers feel supported and perceive themselves to have experienced no direct discrimination, this subtle issue may still be present. More

academic discussion would be useful around this aspect of censorship within educational institutions.

In addition to censorship, difficulties with students and other members of staff in the form of prejudice and homophobia were reported. Reports of discrimination here are similar to those in other cognate pieces of research. Ferfolja (1998) describes the harassment as experienced by interviewees, especially by males in the 15-19 age group. In Ferfolja (2005) she reports that she uncovered practices such as threats of dismissal, forced resignations and implicit harassment from staff. Nixon and Givens find some 'expected, but still surprising evidence of prejudice' (2004: 219).

Some interviewees in this project report to have had problems at work due to their sexuality, be they implicitly or explicitly out. Both in the classroom and in the staffroom there seems to be a gradation of how overt people are willing to be. Both pupils and staff can use underhand insinuations or jokes to make gay and lesbian teachers feel uncomfortable, and on occasions both pupils and teachers are reported to make up front remarks that are homophobic. Discrimination, although not reported as commonplace among the interviewees, is not overt. When interviewees report difficulties, they interpret that different reasons are found to use as excuses for homophobic discrimination. This is their interpretation of events, and where possible within the purview of this project an attempt was made to validate such claims. The negative experiences here mirror

those reported in other studies. However, it is important to keep these comments in perspective. Most of the time respondents have tackled their job on a professional level and fulfilled their teaching and management duties without reference to their sexuality. Many teachers saw themselves as 'teacher first, gay / lesbian second' and indicated that their sexuality was only part of their identity that was brought to their careers. Their daily lives were not usually influenced by their sexuality; their routine concerns, trials and joys were the same as those of any member of staff.

Positive experiences were also to be found, however. This is in contrast to much of the published research, and indicates that not all gay and lesbian secondary teachers experience difficulties at work. Small moments of triumph and positive experiences are largely absent from the literature. In larger quantitative work, some reference is made to the absence of homophobia (for example, Irwin (2002) based in Australia, where 41% of respondents did not report any negative experiences at all (see chapter 2.2.3)). On occasion, teachers are quoted as having experienced no problems at all at work in the UK (for example, Powney et al, where a colleague is cited as saying that he had found 'colleagues to be open, honest and respectful' (2003: 36)). However, within the cognate, qualitative literature few positive experiences are reported. On occasion, improvements in levels of discrimination with experience and length of service are reported (Squires and Sparkes 1996), and in his autoethnographic account of his



experiences Vicars (2006) does mention some positive experiences within a homophobic environment.

In this research small moments of 'personal triumph' have been reported where interviewees have had the opportunity to offer positive views and share experiences with pupils, classes or staff which have had an effect on the school as an institution. On some occasions staff have been able to help pupils struggling with same-sex attraction either by sharing personal experiences and coming out to the pupil, or by pointing them in the right direction for support or help. Gay and lesbian staff are sometimes better placed to do this, because of their personal contacts or localized knowledge. Gay staff have been encouraged by positive staff reaction to disclosure of sexuality, and also by positive opinions expressed by pupils in lessons on the subject. Staff also cited being encouraged by gay students who are either out at school, or who have spoken to members of staff directly. Some staff have seen present or past students in gay venues, and positive experiences of school have been shared. These small moments have been important to the gay staff who experienced them.

None of the literature seeks to describe the positive effects of gay men and lesbians within the classroom; interviewees in this project have reported areas in which they have had a positive effect on teaching and learning within their institutions. Where published literature tends to focus only on difficulties, the different and positive perspectives that gay men and lesbians can offer in the

classroom seems invisible. The effect of gay men and lesbians in the classroom seems to be varied and wide ranging. On occasions issues have been raised that other members of staff may not have highlighted, but in as far as direct effect on curriculum areas is concerned, apart from some staff feeling embarrassed, little difference is discernable. However, there is an underlying desire for inclusivity among gay and lesbian teachers that may be replicated among straight teachers, but seems pronounced and noteworthy among gay staff. Some staff have reported going further than this by seeking out moments and areas of the curriculum where misunderstandings and prejudice can be combated, with the idea of normalizing gay men and lesbians through highlighting them wherever possible in the curriculum. However, it is important to underline again, that these positive experiences as linked to sexuality form only small moments in the teachers' careers, most of their experience in the classroom being routine, and similar to all teachers.

The issue of role models, and being a positive influence for students with emerging lesbian or gay identities was highlighted by respondents in this study. Although little has been published on the issue of gay role models in education, many parallels can be identified between the work of Carrington (2002a and 2002b) and Pole (1999, see chapter 2), who considered the issues of male role models for boys in the primary sector, and black role models in schools.

Respondents in this study had a variety of opinions and experiences in as far as role models are concerned. Most believed that young people need role models representing all sections of society, and considered gay and lesbian role models as important in this light. Carrington (2002b) also calls for a more inclusive form of representation within schools. However, the quality of the role model was highlighted as important; there are respected and less respected teachers, and this does not depend on sexuality. In a similar way, Carrington (2002b) warns against viewing role models as a panacea for levels of underachievement or disengagement among ethnic minorities. He calls for more research in the area, and questions the assumption that matching pupils to teachers by ethnic background as too simplistic. This would mirror the views of participants in this study, who feel that matching pupils by sexuality for support as being overly simplistic. This was backed up by the respondents' own differing experience of school as pupils. Even respondents who felt they needed to be closeted personally or felt that for themselves sexuality is a private affair believed quality role models were good, so long as all of the community was represented.

These individual experiences where teachers have been able to help individuals, or even help in combating prejudice by being an open influence in the school are isolated incidents. They represent a small set of moments where staff have felt able to help pupils, and all have taken place in institutions where homophobia is rejected by management or in policy. They also show moments where the individual teacher has had an effect on individual pupils within the educational

institution, and show that some positive moments exist within the working lives of some gay and lesbian teachers.

One interesting issue that this study raises is the lack of difference between lesbian and gay male experience. In as far as discrimination is concerned it does not seem that lesbians were more at risk of prejudice due to compound issues of both gender and sexuality. As mentioned above, discrimination from pupils, as highlighted by the respondents, is often considered to be the extent to which the teachers fell into gay and lesbian stereotypes (camp gay men, butch lesbians), and their strength as practitioners, rather than their sexuality, or indeed their gender. In the areas of role models and personal triumphs no difference was discerned. This is in contrast to Epstein (1994), Harbeck (1992) and Jennings and Kissen (1994), where the categories of sexuality and gender are seen to compound situations and make the issues more complex. Since the study was not quantitative in nature, numbers of women in senior positions cannot be used to underline further discrimination.

This research has limitations. In particular as mentioned in chapter 3.7 there is a lack of a quantitative strand to this research; in a larger scale project whole populations could be identified and questionnaires administered. In addition, although snowball sampling was the most appropriate and effective method of identifying participants, there is a possibility that the interviewees become unrepresentative, and comments biased. Four specific contacts refused to take

part, although three participants did so as a personal favour. The difficulties in finding willing participants could be due to fear of consequences, although this could also be because of lack of interest. Since the analysis stage one area for further research has been highlighted, that of heterosexual teachers who conform to gay stereotypes (effeminate men and butch women). Further consideration of the experiences of this group may uncover parallels in experience and help better understand the motives and opinions of pupils and staff in as far as perceived sexuality is concerned.

## **5.2 Implications for policy makers**

This research has considered the individual experiences of gay and lesbian teachers in the North-east of England. Not surprisingly, these experiences have proved to be complex and varied. Teachers have a range of experiences in the classroom and with the staff, in addition to having different backgrounds and careers. This research underlines the need to avoid any broad-brush descriptions of lesbian and gay teachers' experiences, as such generalizations may be too inaccurate to be a basis for improvement in practices. It is important for policy makers to find out the range and variety of experiences and use this as a basis for change.

This research has shown that both positive and negative experiences exist. Some teachers have felt fully supported by staff, others have felt some resistance

towards them. Some teachers have had productive classroom relationships with their classes, others have had issues related to sexuality, and even others have used a variety of strategies to overcome any overt or covert homophobia. Some teachers have been able to act as role models or even directly help pupils struggling with same-sex attraction, and others have even created spaces where a positive view of homosexuality has been projected. The author therefore encourages policy makers to identify 'good practice' in schools; that is, ways in which tolerance is promoted and schools where a diversity of both students and staff is not only in evidence, but celebrated. The features of these schools and their distinctive ethos can then be tested within the policy domain. In this way the evidence and reality of teacher experience can be used to shape policy, rather than the over-reliance of the presumed status of and problems for gay staff in school.

### **5.3 Final conclusions**

The fact that it has been reported that gay men and lesbians in teaching experience some censorship and homophobia is not surprising, and supports evidence reported in much of the literature. However, this project does not support the near predominantly negative picture that is painted in the press or in academic papers. Much of the reported homophobia is isolated in incidence, and many interviewees reported positive experiences and small personal triumphs in the classroom. Some respondents even tried to redress the balance by creating

inclusive environments and queering the curriculum as far as they were able. More research is encouraged into the positive effects that gay and lesbian teachers are having in their schools, while continuing to *highlight and challenge* instances of prejudice and homophobia, keeping the latter firmly in perspective.

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