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“We are getting there slowly”: Lesbian teacher identities in the post Section 28 period.

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Authors:

Lisa L. Edwards* David H. K. Brown* and Lauren Smith

*Cardiff Metropolitan University, UK

Corresponding author: Lisa Edwards, 02920416579, lledwards@cardiffmet.ac.uk

“We are getting there slowly”: Lesbian teacher experiences in the post Section 28 environment.

Prior to the subtraction of Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act in 2003 a substantial amount of research was published that specifically examined the experiences of lesbian physical education (PE) teachers. This article contributes to existing academic literature by exploring the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual (LGBT) teachers working in a post Section 28 school environment. Drawing on life history interviews of two lesbian PE teachers we offer insights into how the abolition of Section 28 has affected their lives. Comparable to previous studies, both women reported feeling fearful of the consequences of identifying as lesbian and employed various strategies in order to maintain a divide between their public and private lives so as to conceal their sexual identities from colleagues, pupils and parents. However, in contrast to much of the previous literature, we found that the teachers in this study also identified with *narratives of resistance* (Iannotta & Kane, 2002). Despite being fearful of coming out at work they nevertheless remained committed to coming out when the context is appropriate, to challenging the heteronormative symbolic order configured around the hetero/homo-sexual binary and to more proactively promoting sexual diversity and tolerance in schools.

Keywords: Sexuality; Section 28; Schools; Physical Education; Homophobia; Heteronormativity; Panoptic schema.

Introduction

If UK (United Kingdom) policymaking is a barometer for its prevailing culture then attitudes towards sexual diversity have shifted over the last decade (Nixon 2006). Ferfolja (2009) describes a parallel socio-political shift in other western, English speaking countries such as Australia, Canada and the USA. In each of these countries a number of anti-discriminatory legislative changes have occurred in education (Ferfolja 2009; McCormack and Anderson, 2010; Nixon, 2006) which has helped to 'enhance the personal and professional security of lesbian (and gay) teachers' (Ferfolja, 2009, p. 383).

In the UK the removal of Section 28¹ from the statute book in 2003, despite considerable political and media opposition, was a significant milestone for non-heterosexual teachers (Nixon and Givens 2007), and, according to Ellis and High (2004), 'came to be seen as a key indicator of the success of the lesbian and gay rights movement' (p. 214). Following Clarke (1996), Epstein (2000), Moran (2001) and Burrige (2004), it is worth noting that the legislative power of Section 28 has been generally misunderstood. Section 28 was never subject to judicial test and, according to Epstein (2000), 'was extremely badly drafted and is [sic] probably unenforceable' (p. 387).² Despite being legally ineffectual researchers agree that the legislation had a powerful and lasting cultural effect. As Burrige (2004, p. 329) elaborates:

Most research referring to the legislation has been highly critical, viewing it as symbolic discrimination that institutionalizes a hierarchical relationship between heterosexuality and homosexuality, and it is held up as a prime example of the exclusion of lesbians and gay men from full cultural citizenship.

One of the most plausible reasons for the socio-cultural impact of Section 28 was that it functioned as a *panoptic schema* of surveillance (Foucault, 1977). This schema, characterised by Mathiesen, (1997, p. 215) as one in which ‘the few see the many’ has been widely articulated and discussed in depth elsewhere³, so we limit ourselves here to highlighting a few focal elements. Foucault (1977, p. 200) argued that, in panoptic schemas ‘visibility is a trap’ with ‘the see/being seen dyad’ (p. 202) dissociated. Panoptic ‘surveillance is permanent in its effects’ (p. 201) as a sense of being watched and the fear of retribution for one’s observed actions becomes incorporated into an individual’s consciousness. Over time this transforms behaviour towards an expected social norm, ‘even if it [surveillance] is discontinuous in its action’ (p. 201). As Foucault (1977) predicted the panoptic schema was ‘polyvalent in its application’ and could be used amongst other things ‘to supervise workers’ (p. 205). Thus, in 1988, schools in the UK became a panoptic laboratory for the normalisation of sexual preference in two ways: first, section 28 made heteronormative conformity highly *visible* via the declaration of non-promotion of homosexuality in law. Second, according to Bentham’s core principle of architectural panopticon, upon which the panoptic schema is based, heteronormative conformity was *unverifiable*, as, in schools, no-one really knew who, how or from where this law was being enforced. This encouraged teachers to self-censor their own behaviour in case they were ‘seen’ to be in some way promoting of homosexuality in schools. In addition, we suggest this panoptic schema is a coerced form of what Bourdieu (2001) refers to as *invisibilisation*, a point we will return to later in the article.

Empirically, there seems little doubt that the continuance of this legislation, from 1988 to 2003, did contribute to a climate of fear and self-censorship among sexual minority groups in schools. Studies undertaken during the time of Section 28

highlight the impact that this legislation, and the ensuing public debate about its repeal, had on the lives of teachers (Clarke, 1996, 1997; Epstein, 1994; Epstein, 2000; Nixon & Givens, 2007). For example, Nixon and Givens (2007) conclude that while the legislation was confused 'it nevertheless had the desired effect of encouraging teachers to self-censor in what was in any case regarded as a problematic subject area' (p. 450). Similarly, Clarke's (1996) analysis of the narratives of PE teachers revealed that these discourses had a powerful effect on the participants' lives '...forcing them to engage in damaging self censorship and surveillance' (p. 206). A climate of self-censorship, stimulated by legislative acts like Section 28, helps to sustain the normalisation of heterosexuality. According to Jackson (2006, p. 108) the concept of heteronormativity,

...has become widely used as shorthand for the numerous ways in which heterosexual privilege is woven into the fabric of social life, pervasively and insidiously ordering everyday existence.

Thus, in educational contexts, lesbian and gay sexualities are subject to regulation and marginalisation while 'in most forms heterosexuality is unnamed, unexamined and needs no justification because it is normalised' (Neary 2013, p. 583-4).

Though there has been considerable research examining the impact of homophobia and heterosexism in schools (see for example Larsson, Redelius and Fagrell 2011; Biddulph, 2006; Adams, Cox, & Dunstan, 2004; Ellis and High, 2004; Douglas, Warwick, Kemp, Whitty, & Aggleton, 1999) significant knowledge gaps remain. One such knowledge gap is in understanding the lived experiences of lesbian and gay teachers working in schools subsequent to the abolition of Section 28.⁴ It is unsurprising then that recent empirical studies focusing on the impact of homophobia on lesbian teachers working in a PE context are even scarcer (Sykes

2004; Clarke 2004). In light of this gap in the literature, the present study aims to compare the experiences of two lesbian PE teachers with those reported in similar studies when the legislation was in force. We were interested in how (if at all) the removal of Section 28 has affected the professional/private life divide for the teachers in this study. More specifically, comparing the passing/covering, private-public split and self-censorship strategies identified in previous studies helps to ascertain whether such strategies are still utilised and, if so, begin to explore the question of why this might be the case.

Relevant research

Our starting point in this article is the research carried out before the removal of Section 28, which documented the experiences of lesbian PE teachers in the UK (see for example Sparkes, 1994, 1996; Squires & Sparkes, 1996; Clarke, 1996, 1997, 1998, 2002a, 2002b). Drawing on similar studies from Canada and the USA (Lenskyj, 1991; Griffin, 1992, 1998; Woods, 1992), these authors revealed the various strategies used by lesbian PE teachers to construct and manage their identities in a heteronormative and often homophobic environment.⁵

The term homophobia can be understood in individual or psychological terms as the irrational fear or intolerance of homosexuality, lesbians, gay men and bisexual people (Griffin, 1992, 1998; Sparkes, 1994). This fear and intolerance is manifest in a range of ways including verbal taunts, denigratory comments, physical aggression and even acts of physical violence. Each of these is used to police the 'acceptable' boundaries of gender and sexuality. A number of these researchers also highlighted that the term homophobia, by itself, does not describe the systematic social and institutional beliefs that support and maintain homophobic attitudes (Sparkes, 1994;

Squires & Sparkes, 1996; Clarke, 1998).⁶ For instance, Clarke (1998) argued that 'it is necessary to recognise that homophobia is a political practice, and that sexuality is a political issue, insofar as some practices are approved of, some are disapproved of, and some are illegal and punishable' (p. 146). Thus, heterosexism is understood as a set of beliefs and attitudes which present heterosexuality as the 'norm' and consider alternative sexualities as unnatural. It is through these assumptions about nature and what is considered natural that heterosexism becomes a powerfully oppressive and discriminatory set of institutionalised beliefs and practices.⁷

Given the generally conservative perception of PE and the New Right political agendas on sexuality in the 1980s and 1990s (Sparkes 1994; Nixon & Givens 2007), it is unsurprising that one of the themes that dominated these studies about lesbian PE teachers relates to their fears and experience of discrimination at work (Woods 1992; Clarke 1996). For example, in Clarke's (1996) interview based study the participants felt that lesbian teachers were particularly vulnerable to hostility and accusations from parents and pupils. She reported that, 'Few dared to reveal their real identity for a number of reasons: the main one being that of loss of employment and the fear that they would never get another teaching post...' (Clarke, 1996, p. 197). Woods (1992) reported similar findings in a phenomenological study of lesbian PE teachers in the USA. Woods (1992) asserted that lesbian PE teachers were likely to remain silent about their sexual identity because 'they believed they would be fired if their sexual orientation was publicly disclosed' (p. 96).

Within the literature – both in UK and USA based studies – teachers reported feeling uneasy in one-to-one situations with pupils, such as supporting a pupil in gymnastics or supervising pupils in the changing rooms (Woods, 1992; Clarke, 1996, 1997, 2002a, 2002b; Sparkes, 1994; Squires & Sparkes, 1996). In a study based on

a series of in-depth interviews with 14 lesbian PE teachers, Clarke (1997) reported: 'All of the women talked in some detail about how they avoided getting 'too close' to pupils so as not to place themselves in at-risk situations' (p. 106). The participants described at-risk situations as centred on 'a number of related issues to do with the body, sexuality and physicality' (Clarke, 1997, p. 43).

Of course, heterosexual teachers may also experience anxiety over their relationships with and influence on the children they teach. Recent studies have suggested an increased concern around 'touching behaviours' between adults and children in physical education which has resulted in 'an atmosphere of increased surveillance' for teachers (Piper, Garratt and Taylor, 2013, p. 575).⁸ Fletcher (2013), drawing on Foucault's panoptic schema, found an increased climate of fear amongst practising physical education teachers in the UK. He describes the process by which teachers would 'mutually monitor each other' in an 'attempt to safeguard their profession' (Fletcher 2012, p. 705-706). This suggests that the mechanisms of surveillance and the potentially damaging consequences of self-regulatory behaviour are most likely shared by all teachers.

Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that lesbian and gay teachers often feel a heightened sense of anxiety and increased self censorship in these situations because of the social stigma attached to non-conventional sexualities (Lenskyj, 1991; Clarke, 1996). It is also reasonable to assume, as Clarke (1996, 1997) does, that the ambiguously worded Section 28 had a significant impact on the lives of lesbian teachers 'causing many of them to fear for the continuation of their employment should their sexuality be revealed' (Clarke, 1996, p. 194).

Research from a number of the above studies also highlighted that lesbian PE teachers tended to experience a private-public split in their lives. Clarke (1996,

1997), as well as Sparkes (1994, 1996), and Squires and Sparkes (1996), reported that participants experienced anxiety and turmoil both at work and in their personal lives, as a result of concealing their lesbian identities. In Clarke's (1996) study one teacher commented on the anxiety of 'having to live two separate lives and constantly living in fear of giving anything away that might later be used as ammunition against you' (p. 199). Echoing these findings, Squires and Sparkes (1996), who carried out life history work with five lesbian teachers at different stages in their careers, concluded that in a hetero-normative school environment the participants' public lives were 'dominated by a range of strategies designed to conceal from others what they see as a core feature of themselves' (Squires & Sparkes, 1996, p. 95). This sense of self denial – of being torn between two identities – resulted in damaging self censorship and a sense of alienation in their professional life. As Squires and Sparkes (1996, p. 95) cogently put it:

For the most part, they felt constantly under surveillance and were conscious of constant assessment from the vantage point of heterosexuality, and therefore carefully edited their conversations with other teachers, even in the back regions such as the staff room, so as not to reveal their lesbian identity. In the front regions when they were teaching and interacting with children, they felt similar pressures. Therefore, in both front and back stage regions these teachers were denied an essential freedom involving the freedom to interact in the public space, without having to hide their sexual identity, and construct their lives in school according to the prescribed script of assumed heterosexuality.

In addition, Clarke (1996) found that the private-public split that lesbian teachers maintained was damaging to their self-confidence as feelings of dishonesty and mistrust affected relationships with colleagues. One teacher commented '[I] hold back a significant part of myself all the time. I don't have any sort of intimate friendships. I suppose for fear of being exposed and for the pain that would cause' (p. 198). One of the participants in Squires and Sparkes's (1996) research also

'found herself being evasive and dishonest' in conversations with other young newly qualified teachers (p. 85). For many of the women in these studies fears of exposure to work colleagues acted as a constraint on life inside *and* outside of school (Sparkes, 1994; Clarke, 1996, 1997). Reflecting on the experiences of a newly qualified PE teacher (Jessica) Sparkes (1994, p.105) wrote that:

...Jessica regularly participated in the annual Gay pride march held in London. However, this year she was not sure about going, 'I was suddenly faced with the decision of whether I risked going and possibly being seen by somebody.... Even though you rationalise that those chances are very remote, there's still a pressure that hadn't been there until I started the job'. Eventually, Jessica decided to go on the march but remained nervous throughout in case someone saw her, or her face appeared on the TV screen and was noticed by her teaching colleagues or parents of pupils.

According to the authors of these studies the continuance of Section 28 contributed to the personal turmoil experienced by lesbian teachers. At the same time, it is important to note that mounting resistance to Section 28 and public attempts to combat anti-gay discrimination in schools presented an opportunity for resistance and the possibility of change (Squires & Sparkes, 1996).⁹

Another common theme that emerged in the research focused on the lives of lesbian PE teachers was the identity management strategies the participants used to reveal or conceal their sexual identity. Sparkes (1994, p. 93) highlights two such coping strategies, namely, *passing* and *covering*. *Passing* is a strategy used to pass oneself off as heterosexual that can be divided into passive and active forms (Sparkes, 1994; Griffin, 1998). The former refers to a situation where someone assumes that an individual is heterosexual and that assumption goes uncontested. The latter, on the other hand, refers to a situation where an individual purposively suggests that they are heterosexual, for example by speaking about a male partner,

and intentionally lying about one's sexuality. In Squires and Sparkes's (1996) study, one of the teachers remembered the passing strategies she had employed:

To start with I was really very wary ... I hid it so they didn't know. They would ask, 'Have you got a boyfriend?' And I would say, 'Lots'. And, 'Are you going to get married?' I'd say, 'Oh well, I don't know really' ... There was this period where I had this imaginary boyfriend that I allowed them to think I had. I must have needed them to think that I had one... (Squires & Sparkes, 1996, p. 89)

Covering involves purposely avoiding situations in which one's sexuality might be revealed. Covering lesbians are not trying to be perceived as heterosexual, but trying to hide their sexual identity (Sparkes 1994; Griffin 1998). This would include censoring conversations with others in order to avoid the topic of personal life, avoiding socialising with colleagues and, when conversing about personal life, the use of non gendered language not to give anything away. Similarly, teachers in Woods's (1992) study spoke about the personal censoring that they employed to avoid disclosing their sexuality and, in some cases, to distance themselves from any discussion of homosexuality. The picture that emerges from the existing empirical literature suggests that lesbian teachers employed a range of strategies to manage and conceal their sexuality and that they often felt forced to 'pass' as heterosexual. As Clarke (1996) points out, such forms of self-censorship are not without personal cost, contradiction and conflict.

Given the cultural and political significance attributed to the removal of Section 28, it is perhaps surprising that the experiences of lesbian and gay teachers working in the post Section 28 period are under-represented in the literature.¹⁰ Consequently, the purpose of this study was to compare the experiences of lesbian PE teachers who gained employment following the repeal of the controversial legislation with

those reported in similar studies in the 1990s, during the time in which when Section 28 was operational.

Methods

The participants in this study were two PE teachers who self-identified as lesbians. Both of the participants were known personally to one of the researchers and were asked to take part in the study based on the principles of purposive sampling (Palys, 2008). At the time of the research they were teaching PE in co-educational secondary schools in the UK and both taught ages 11 to 18. Self-chosen pseudonyms were used throughout the study to ensure the participants' anonymity and any information which could lead to their identity being revealed was hidden through means of covering names of places and other people discussed during the interviews (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). Jayne is 25 years old: she self-identifies as a lesbian and lives with her long term partner. She is 'out' with some of the staff at school, her friends and her mother, but not with the rest of her family. Jayne has disclosed her sexuality to a small number of close confidants at her school. She feels sure that the vast majority of staff know that she is gay, or that they suspect it, but she does not name herself as a lesbian and her sexual identity is rarely explicitly mentioned. Emma is 29 years old and she has been working in her current secondary school for three years. Previous to this she has worked in two other schools since graduating from teacher training. Emma is 'out' to her friends, a select number of colleagues and her parents and sister. Neither of the participants constructed sexuality as fixed or unchanging. In fact, both participants seemed to acknowledge the fluidity of sexuality and were able to identify with a multiple of lesbian identities. Nevertheless, despite recognising that their sexual identity had

changed at various points in their lives, the participants continued to describe their sexuality in dichotomous terms ('gay' and 'straight') and to identify with gay culture more broadly. In order to explore the influence of heterosexism and homophobia on the lived realities of these teachers a life history approach was used.

Our approach to life history has much in common with the life history research carried out by Squires and Sparkes (1996) due to the potential of the strategy for reclaiming lesbian voices in order to 'reduce the invisibility of one particular group of teachers and thereby assist in their process of fracturing the silence that surrounds issues of sexual identity in the world of PE and sport' (p. 79). Life history has been described as a method of qualitative inquiry that enables the researcher to record and interpret voices that are normally silenced (Sparkes, 1994). According to Brown and Evans (2004) 'Life history research data are generated from direct interaction with the participants and focus on the stories they tell' (p. 51).

In this study various moments of the participants' life stories were recorded through two in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Open and reflexive interviews, each lasting up to 90 minutes were conducted by one of the authors at a location of the participants' choosing. Following Lapadat and Lindsay (1999) these interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed and then returned to the participants for what Maxwell (1996) refers to as 'member checking' for factual accuracy and representativeness of opinions expressed. The face-to-face interviews were followed by a series of email interviews which enabled the participants to review, and to elaborate on, comments made in the previous interviews. Once the interviews were transcribed they were then coded using a constant comparative method which consists of 'an intense, systematic process of examining and re-examining the data while comparing one source with another to find similarities and differences'

(Yamagata-Lynch, 2010, p. 73). In order to facilitate a comparative approach we followed the reasoning of Crown (1997, p. 4) who argues that,

...comparisons allow us to discern regularities and to distinguish between broad types of sociological phenomena which are fundamentally the same and which conform to the same general patterns of development despite the presence of innumerable superficial differences between cases.

Therefore, our constant comparison focused on the previously emergent themes of passing/covering, private-public split and self censorship strategies in light of the removal of Section 28. We were not predisposed to demonstrate any alignment or misalignment between these themes and our data, but rather sought to use them to provide an empirical platform to explore underlying reasons for continuities and changes observed. Following Sparkes (2002) we adopted a realist tale writing strategy to report the findings; as such, the participants' own words are used to illuminate their lived realities as teachers in specific contexts and 'to provide a path to understanding that is grounded in the concrete details of experience' (Seidman et al 1983, as cited in Woods 1992, p. 96). While acknowledging the dilemmas of representation and authorship associated with realist tales (Sparkes 2002), we considered it the most suitable method of retaining the focus of this paper, which was to interrupt the continuing silence surrounding lesbian PE teachers in the hope of promoting greater awareness and acceptance of non conventional sexualities in school settings.

Post Section 28: The risk of being 'out'

According to Nixon and Givens (2007), there is some evidence that the official discourse around homosexuality in schools 'has shifted at least contemporaneously if not causally with the repeal of Section 28' (p. 457). Despite the removal of Section

28, and recent suggestions that school culture has become more 'gay friendly' and inclusive (McCormack and Anderson, 2010), a common theme in both the life stories was the assumption that coming out and being out at school was unwise, particularly at the beginning of a teaching career. Despite coming out to friends in university, and participating in aspects of gay culture, Emma nevertheless still felt that as a teacher she would have to keep her sexual identity separate: 'I was like, is this what I want [to pursue a career in teaching]. Because I'm going to have to hide my [sexuality] ... it was the start of living two lives then'. Emma felt that schools were particularly conservative environments: she described the PE departments experienced during her PGCE as male dominated and chauvinistic. She recalled that:

I would never [have] said 'oh I'm Emma...I'm gay and have a partner', because they would've absolutely annihilated me. So, even though my colleagues knew, you know my colleagues on my course, I know I would never [have] told people that I worked with. (Emma)

Similarly Jayne recalled feeling particularly anxious during her teaching practice:

...as a trainee you just want to do your best, get on with the course and pass I suppose; and be a good teacher. You don't want any other issues to get in the way. I suppose that's why I didn't bring it up, I didn't mention it and yeah I didn't really want the kids to know at that point. (Jayne)

Echoing the findings reported by Squires and Sparks (1996) the participants in this study seemed to anticipate homophobic reactions, experiencing 'considerable stress and anxiety', irrespective of the behaviour of others (p. 83). For Squires and Sparkes (1996) anticipation of such behaviour implies that the lesbian teacher has taken on the responsibility for the reaction of others and adjusts her behaviour accordingly. According to Woods (1992) this type of 'internalized homophobia' is a form of 'self-blame and self-hatred' (p. 113), whereby women have internalized a negative image of lesbians and consequently struggle with self acceptance.

On making the transition to their first teaching job Emma and Jayne were reluctant to disclose their sexual identity. Jayne implied that describing herself as gay or lesbian in a new school was simply too risky. When asked whether she would tell anyone at a new school that she was gay Jayne said ‘...I wouldn’t openly go up to someone and go ‘oh by the way I’m gay’...no matter where I was or what job I started’. Emma describes a similar feeling of being ‘edgy’ and worrying that:

[being gay] was going to be a bit of a nightmare to hide because, um, I’d seen other older gay friends go through it and go through quite a tough time of it, so I think I kind of knew that it wasn’t going to be an easy ride at all and that’s why I probably didn’t tell anybody because I could see what other people have gone through. (Emma)

Emma and Jayne were particularly worried about concealing their sexual identity from their pupils and their pupils’ parents. A similar picture emerged in the 1990s research. Clarke (1996), for example, found through in-depth interviews with lesbian teachers that the women feared having their sexual identity disclosed in case they were ‘viewed as paedophiles, child molesters and perverts’ (p. 201). The participants in the present study also reported feeling worried about their relationships with pupils. Emma felt:

Scared about the kids, scared about the parents, scared about the impression it makes of yourself, scared about their judgement, their comments, their opinions and their sweeping statements they will make, what rumours will go around school, speculation that starts. (Emma)

Neither of the participants had ever come out to any students. In fact, Emma and Jayne felt that they had to maintain a façade in front of pupils, both at school and outside their place of work. Jayne found that despite her earlier fears she was able to be open about her sexuality with the staff at her current school: however she fervently desires to remain closeted to pupils. A recent incident during a lesson in

which she overheard her class discussing her sexuality has left her feeling worried and exposed. She commented:

I stayed in the office until they [the pupils] went, purely because I didn't want to entice them into saying anything else. I didn't want to bring up the subject to be honest. I was a bit scared of them asking [me] straight out because I didn't know what I would say. So I didn't come out of the office, I stayed until they [had] left. (Jayne)

Jayne also explained that she was fearful of pupils 'finding out' in case they told their parents. She remarked:

I'm assuming here, I'm probably wrong in saying this; they [parents] probably would have a negative image of me if they knew that I was gay and they would be afraid to let their kids come into my lessons... I'd hate to have all those complaints in school and me being told that some kids can't be in my lessons because their parents don't want them to. (Jayne)

Jayne also worried that if she upset any pupils she might be accused '...of doing stuff that would probably jeopardise my career'. On one hand, neither Emma nor Jayne suggested that choosing to reveal their sexual identity would lead to dismissal from their job. On the other hand, both participants talked as though coming out could have an impact on their career choices and professional relationships.

Therefore, despite the repeal of Section 28 and the recent introduction of legislation prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, the teachers in this study remain fearful and continue to err on the side of caution. Despite not having reported experiencing explicit or direct homophobia themselves, Emma and Jayne continue to engage in self-censorship and, on the whole, maintain silence about their sexual identity. This suggests that the cultural legacy of section 28 is that the panoptic schema is still very much embedded in these teachers'

consciousness and continues to perform a disciplinary function that renders their sexualities invisible.

Coping strategies: existing in a heterosexist and homophobic culture

Echoing much of the existing literature the participants in this study employed a range of strategies to hide their sexual identity and minimise the chances of suspicion. In this respect, Griffin's (1998) identity management model reflects the experiences of the participants: Emma and Jayne felt compelled to negotiate and manage their sexual identity. Although the framework put forward by Griffin (1998) does not tell the whole story (more on this later), the strategies that Emma and Jayne employed reflected, to some degree, Griffin's (1998) model.

'Putting on an act': passing and assimilating

According to the findings of the previous research discussed above, lesbians who pass as heterosexual typically adopt a range of strategies 'in order to keep up appearances of heterosexuality' (Sparkes 1994, p. 104). Rather than acknowledge her lesbian relationship as legitimate or viable, Jayne 'passes' her relationship off as a heterosexual one. Jayne explained:

My girlfriend's name is Shauna (pseudonym) and therefore I always call her Shaun, so I've shortened the name so it's a man's name, so if my phone's taken off me or anything, or if I leave my phone somewhere, then it's not obvious that I'm with a woman. (Jayne)

As Squires and Sparkes (1996) note, these conversations would take place in spaces where 'it is assumed that teachers can and will spend time relaxing, recuperating and chatting' (p. 84). Jayne remembered adopting passing strategies when responding to colleagues' questions about their relationships, commenting:

If I was to have a conversation with somebody and they said '[who] are you going out with this weekend?' 'who are you going out with?' blah blah blah I wouldn't say I'm going out with my partner, as such, I would probably say I'm going out with friends to *cover* myself a little bit... (Jayne) (emphasis added)

Emma also recalled using a range of strategies in order to hide her sexual identity: she changed the name of female partners to a male equivalent, lied about the places she visited on the weekends and would intentionally 'over flirt' with men to compensate for her female relationships. She also recalls using passing techniques to hide her sexuality from pupils:

[I'd probably say] I'm meeting up with Dave, or maybe some random people's names, or pretend I'm going on pretend dates or going on holiday with a guy when I was going on holiday with a girl, um yeah just bits and pieces like that really. (Emma)

I used to lie to the kids and say I was married with kids, and they believed me until maybe a year and a half [in the job] and they were like actually miss you haven't got a ring; have you really got kids? No. But yeah, I absolutely used to lie about everything. (Emma)

She intentionally presented her appearance in a feminine way as a method of communicating her 'heterosexuality':

...yeah I would always try...whether that would be straightening my hair or wearing my hair down, yeah you would try and do something to always look a little bit feminine or female. (...) on parents' evening you make a massive effort and don't go in your tracksuit and like on staff nights out...I probably overdid it on staff nights...I would really go over the top feminine to try and then you know put them off the track or trail or whatever you want to call it... . (Emma)

Hiding her sexual identity from colleagues and students meant that Emma felt constantly fearful of 'being found out'. Emma recalled that her constant fear of discovery started to affect her relationship.

I was so nervous about walking around town with my ex-girlfriend. She used to go nuts at me, [she'd say] 'I don't want to walk with you you're getting on my nerves, you're just being so paranoid about seeing the kids', and I could've classed her as a friend, even though she was my girlfriend, I could've said 'oh this is a friend,' but I didn't I was worried that the kids would see me with this girl and think she was my girlfriend. (Emma)

The point to be emphasised here is that the participants in this study felt compelled to present 'heterosexual stories' in order to distance themselves from the lesbian stereotype. In spite of the lack of certainty as to the negative consequences of their coming out, the continuation of passing and assimilation strategies suggests the removal of structural barriers such as Section 28, does not ensure the open expression of sexual identity.

Secrets and Silences: 'covering up'

According to Fusco (1998), sport and PE are social institutions that contribute to the maintenance of dominant values which underpin heteronormativity. This claim was borne out in the studies discussed above where lesbian PE teachers felt pressured to self monitor and cover their personal lives in order to construct an acceptable identity. Griffin (1998) describes the intentional censoring or covering of sexual identity as 'a middle ground between passing as heterosexual and actually coming out' (p. 138). Although at this stage in her teaching career Jayne has gained the confidence to come out to some of her colleagues she still opts to side step questions about her personal life and rarely volunteers more information than necessary. This is particularly true when starting in a new school, Jayne commented:

...it's always difficult being a new member of staff and you want the staff to like you and you don't want anything to get in the way and being gay just makes it harder because you don't know what their reactions are especially

with the older members of staff, the men in particular, you don't know how they are going to react to it and so it's just easier to keep it quiet than it is to blurt it out and be open about it. (Jayne)

For the participants in Clarke's (1996) study disclosing only self-selected personal information that doesn't 'tell a story' (p. 197) was a constant process of self-censorship and surveillance. Jayne recalled censoring her staff room conversations by using non sex-specific language to describe her girlfriend and thus 'cover' her lesbian identity: 'I suppose I still do it now I, I would never say 'me and my girlfriend' in school...I would always say my partner which people probably question if they don't know me'. When it came to concealing their sexual identity from pupils and some staff both Emma and Jayne would side step personal questions.

According to Griffin (1998) teachers use covering strategies 'to prevent others from seeing any evidence of their lesbian identity' (p. 138). Adopting covering (and passing) strategies required Jayne and Emma to inhabit 'multiple identities', to maintain separate private and public lives, so that they might avoid any 'overlap between their two worlds' (Woods 1992, p. 102). Looking back over her first few years in teaching Emma recalled:

I lived very much two massively separate lives in that first school I lived my work life and then I would come home ... and be a totally different person and go gay clubbing every weekend and have a girlfriend and then I would come back to school and lie about it. ...no one knew I was gay, so I lived totally different two lives. I had my school life and then my personal life and I never let them cross over. (Emma)

Similarly, Jayne explains the importance of keeping a personal and professional split.

I do have two identities, but I think you do as a teacher anyway. You have your private life and I like the way that I am in terms that I live quite far away from the school, so I can have very much my own private life that the kids don't know about and even some staff don't know about, whereas I think if I

lived closer to the school and the kids saw me all the time it would be much more difficult. (Jayne)

Jayne explained the professional/personal split that she maintained as necessary for any teacher, thus framing sexual orientation as a personal and private issue that does not need to be publicly acknowledged. However, as Woods (1992) has pointed out in her life history research, 'Many of the participants described making this separation as a choice, but in various ways, their words and experiences contradicted this description' (p. 102). The consequences of such a move are clearly damaging – as illustrated in the literature discussed. As Griffin (1998) reasons, if lesbian identity remains as an exclusively private matter it 'effectively takes any discussion about heterosexism and homophobia in sport [and PE] off the professional table' (p. 215). Lesbians are of course entitled to privacy, but by defining sexual identity as a personal matter, 'The onus of change is placed on the individual and not the system' (Woods 1992, p. 114-115).

Reflections

Our analytical strategy for this article was to ascertain whether a range of self-censorship strategies identified in previous studies of lesbian PE teachers in the UK context were still utilised in a post section 28 environment and, if so, begin to explore the question of why this might be the case. It is encouraging that these teachers reported experiencing little homophobia directly or indirectly in their professional lives. What is revealing however is that congruent with the findings from pre-abolition of Section 28 studies, Emma and Jayne reported feeling anxious and uncertain about revealing their sexual identity in their professional lives. In particular they self-regulated their relationships with pupils for fear of the way they might be

perceived by others. The decision to conceal their sexual identity from pupils and, hence, their pupils' parents, is unsurprising in light of the problematic association of homosexuality with sexual deviancy (Clarke 1996). Despite the absence of any legal barriers or personal experiences suggesting that an open lesbian identity would result in forms of professional or personal retribution, their stories reveal perceptions of fear of being themselves and feelings of a 'need' to conform to the dominant heterosexual school culture. Consistent with Squires and Sparkes's (1996) findings, Emma and Jayne have internalised assumptions of the presence of homophobia and heterosexism resulting in *self-silencing strategies*. This raises questions as to why, in the absence of explicit threats of retribution, such behaviours continue to occur.

A partial answer is provided by Foucault's (1977) emphasis on the discontinuous nature of the panoptic schema, which is 'not simply a hinge, a point of exchange between a mechanism of power and a function: it is a way of making power relations function *in a function* and of making a function *function through* these power relations' (p. 206-7, *emphasis added*). From this perspective, Section 28 was a highly effective piece of legislation which, transposing Bentham's terminology (cited in Foucault, 1977, p. 207), successfully turned UK schools into 'inspection-houses' for the imposition of idealised heteronormative behaviours that did 'not cut, but untied' the 'Gordian knot' of repressive sexual legislation of the past. Thus, while the legislation is discontinued, its work has been effective in re-asserting the function of heteronormative power relations through schools and particularly its teachers. This latter point leads to a second observation of this situation that Bourdieu (2001, p. 121) refers to as *invisibilisation*, in which:

Everything takes place as if the homosexuals who have had to fight to move from invisibility to visibility, to cease to be excluded and made visible, sought to become

invisible again, and in a sense neutered and neutralized by submission to the dominant norm.

Moreover, such coerced invisibility remains problematic in changing heterosexual orthodoxy because as Brown (2006) contends, “visible invisibility” lays down little challenge and leaves mainstream oppositional masculine/feminine doxas effectively mobilised and sustained’ (p. 180). Such a view presents a bleak picture if our participants’ actions are replicated widely in the schooling system. However, importantly, this study also contains evidence of the limitations of the panoptic schema in constructing subjectivity and mobilising deeper behaviour change. Similarly, invisibilisation, while observable, may be a temporary strategy masking slow, but significant, ongoing change. By way of conclusion we reflect on three observations, each of which contributes to a more complex picture.

First, although Emma and Jayne employed some of the identity management strategies documented by Griffin (1998), their experiences also seem to challenge the assumption that these strategies move progressively from being, totally closeted to being totally out. Indeed, following Iannotta and Kane (2002), we consider that such progressively linear models may (mis)represent the women in this study as victims of homophobia, coerced into invisibility and ineffectiveness by the panoptic schema. Our interpretation is supported by comments made by Emma that suggest her management of sexual identity is much more contextualised and strategic:

[I] think that this [being out] will vary from school to school and it really does depend on how comfortable you feel with your sexuality. It varied from school to school, it [varied according to] personal circumstances as well, because if your girlfriend doesn’t feel comfortable with it either it makes it twice as hard for the relationship.... Then again it depends [on] if you feel settled in your job and school and happy with your management because automatically if you’ve got a good manager that’ll stick up for you and support you no matter what, you’re alright...but say if I didn’t have that support, like I didn’t at my first school... (Emma)

Second, Iannotta and Kane (2002), have argued that by privileging coming out and being out linguistically, we may fail to illuminate acts of agency and resistance by individuals 'who do not identify themselves as publicly or explicitly out lesbians' (p. 353-354). As Sparkes (1994) argued it is the responsibility of *all* educators to implicate measures against homophobic and heterosexist attitudes, in order to create a safe and accepting climate for alternative sexualities.

Moreover, heteronormativity affects the lives of all teachers regardless of sexual identity (Allen 2011; Larsson et al 2011; Jackson 2006). For instance, discourses of heteronormativity are interwoven with ways of 'doing gender' that tend to reinforce binary thinking (Hills and Croston 2012; Renold 2010; Allan 2009). Jackson (2006, p. 105) explains that:

...institutionalized, normative heterosexuality regulates those kept within its boundaries as well as marginalizing and sanctioning those outside them. The term 'heteronormativity' has not always captured this double-sided social regulation.

Within a culture of presumed heteronormativity the question of whether to reveal or disclose one's heterosexuality might seem 'redundant, even nonsensical' (Allen 2011, 81). Yet, as Allen (2011) explains, 'Failing to identify explicitly as heterosexual can serve to reinforce the homosexual-heterosexual binary, where silence about heterosexual identity maintains its 'normal' and 'natural' status'. In contrast, Bourdieu (2001, p. 23) argues for symbolic subversion, the purpose of which is:

To perform a labour of symbolic destruction and construction aimed at imposing new categories of perception and appreciation, so as to construct a group, or, more radically, to destroy the very principle of division through which the stigmatised group and the stigmatising group are produced.

Thus heterosexual teachers, such as the supportive managers alluded to by Emma above, are playing an important role in beginning to disrupt heteronormativity. There is also evidence that Emma and Jayne are beginning to subvert the homo/heterosexual binary. For the most part Emma and Jayne described their sexual identity, and the sexual identity of others, as either gay or straight. Nevertheless, despite locating their sexuality in dichotomous terms now, both Emma and Jayne recognised that their sexual identity has changed at various points in their lives. Whilst Jayne constructed her sexuality as fairly fixed, Emma acknowledged the potential ambiguity of sexuality. In fact, in the final interview Emma resisted using the terms gay or lesbian to describe her sexuality and felt comfortable with leaving the question open. Other scholars, such as Ravel and Rail (2008, 2006) and Broad (2001) have also drawn attention to participants' constructions of sexuality as multiple and fluid, rather than fixed and dichotomous. Griffin's model does not account for women who actively resist sexual identity labels and therefore might need revisiting and adapting in light of this and other recent research on sexual identity. As Iannotta and Kane (2002) point out, 'only a very narrow range of sexual identity performances (e.g. linguistically naming oneself as lesbian) are recognised as being effective in creating climates of tolerance and, by extension, social change' (p. 366).

Third, our findings differ from the previous literature – but echo a recent study by Ferfolja (2008) – in that both participants were willing to refer to anti-discriminatory legislation in order to combat homophobia or 'anti-lesbian harassment' (Ferfolja 2008, p. 111). Additionally, despite the fear of isolation and negative stereotypes Emma and Jayne expressed a desire to act as agents for social change. For example, when asked whether she felt able to challenge homophobia Emma replied

that she would in her current school with the support of colleagues and her head of school. Jayne also felt it was important to challenge homophobic comments, but acknowledged that she felt vulnerable doing it: ‘...it could backfire on me and I’d leave it and that’s the wrong thing to do, but it’s just easier...’. Nevertheless, Jayne expressed her ambition to overcome her fear of being ‘caught out’ in school. She expressed a desire to be open and honest with other students in order to provide the pupils with a good role model.

In conclusion, it is important to state that while these teachers may engage in strategic forms of self-censorship and choose to remain invisible at this time, there remains an important sense of agency in their stories; they have not changed their sexualities in order to conform with the prevailing heteronormative orthodoxy; they have not left the profession in flight from its panoptic schemas; they retain the aspiration of becoming more proactive when circumstances are right: and they have not given up the hope that schools might come to represent sexual diversity and tolerance in the future. Given this, there may be some cause for the optimism expressed by Emma that ‘we are getting there slowly’.

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Notes

¹ Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act stated that 'a local authority shall not: (a) intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality; (b) promote the teaching in any

maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship...’ (Clarke, 1996, p. 193).

² At the time of enactment Robertson, QC commented ‘In reality there is little to fear from Section 28 except fear itself... Section 28 is largely redundant. Its more potent effect is as a symbol of the prejudice of the present Parliament’ (as cited in Clarke, 1996, p.194).

³ See for example, Lyon, 2006

⁴ See Nixon and Givens, 2007 for a notable exception

⁵ During the 1990s, in her pioneering research on the impact of homophobia and heterosexism on sexual identity, Griffin (1991, 1992) formulated a *continuum of identity management strategies* used by lesbian and gay educators. Griffin’s continuum is essentially a ‘risk assessment typology’ (Iannotta & Kane, 2002, p. 353) that enables the lesbian teacher to hide or reveal her sexuality to varying degrees, depending on the specific context (Iannotta & Kane, 2002). Manifestations of Griffin’s identity management strategies can be found in a range of literature – including Sparkes (1994), (1996) and Squires and Sparkes (1996) and Clarke (1997) in the UK, and Woods (1992) in the USA.

⁶ See Lenskyj (1991) and Herek (2004) for a more detailed discussion of the terms homophobia and heterosexism.

⁷ Butler’s work, along with feminist and queer theory more broadly, denies the naturalness of the relationship between sex, gender, sexual practice and desire: ‘Intelligible’ genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender and sexual practice, and desire’ (Butler, 1990, p. 23). She argues that heterosexuality is constructed as the natural, normal and acceptable way of living and is enforced by institutions, laws, government, education and popular culture.

⁸ See also Piper, Taylor and Garratt (2012).

⁹ Epstein (1994) argued that Section 28 had ‘contradictory effects’ (p.7) and, in some ways, actually ‘succeeded in promoting homosexuality’ (p.7) by raising awareness of social injustices and gathering support for gay and lesbian rights.

¹⁰ See Nixon and Given (2007), Sykes (2004) and Clarke (2004) for notable exceptions.