

What lesbians do in bed, and other stories

In her second article looking at sex and sexuality, Vicky Millard looks at how professionals should discuss young people and sexual orientation, and how this impacts upon our practice

It's a sticky subject in more ways than one. Sex. And not just the medical nuts and bolts of menstrual cycles, wet dreams, pregnancy and childbirth – although that can be unnerving enough – but the messy, complicated business of relationships, love, choosing not to, infidelity, marriage, dealing with conflict, and emotions. It's enough to send many self-respecting teachers, youth workers and parents running for the hills in a flurry of self-help leaflets and mumblings of storks and gooseberry bushes. But most of us, somehow, manage to get a handle on the basics, even if it is a rather hit-and-miss process. Most of us get some level of sex education in our schools now; most of us have had some level of tearstained bonding with our mums and sisters over a lost teenage love, or a manly banter with our dads and brothers over the wiles of women; most of us have borrowed tampons, pinched condoms and shared embarrassing tales of less-than-earth-moving sexual encounters, unwanted infections, and narrow escapes from jealous partners or suspicious parents.

But I am prepared to bet that not nearly so many of us have ever had a conversation about our sexual orientation or sexuality, about who we are attracted to, or about what turns us on. Even as adults, this area of sexual health and wellbeing is swept under the carpet with a polite cough, as we find deflecting humour in bar-room stories of handcuffs with the key lost for ever or second-hand giggles of 'a friend' who had to go to Accident and Emergency, for the usual comic reasons. And the 'gay men make great shopping companions' school of sexual orientation is still alive and well, living alongside the fantasies of lesbian pornography, and sleeping with your girlfriend and her best friend. Given this background, is it surprising that we are hesitant about how to effectively deal with issues young people bring to us about their own sexuality and sexual orientation?

The situation is further confused by legal and 'advisory' guidelines about what is required/optional/appropriate when it comes to formal education and support for young people around issues of sexuality. Despite the demise of Section 28, many teachers and other professionals are unaware that it is no longer in place. In addition, few people realise that Section 28 did not state that homosexuality could not be discussed, only that it could not be 'promoted'. Quite how you promote a sexual orientation, I have never

been able to establish, beyond strange visions of rock concert-style merchandisers, waving T-shirts with 'Homo Is Where The Heart Is' printed on them, perhaps?! The legacy of Section 28, unfortunately, is still with us, most notably when Kent Council recently attempted to reinstate very similar guidelines into its education system. The UK education system is a place where professionals and students alike are largely afraid to discuss sexuality or sexual orientation, to ask questions about it, or to even admit that anyone even has a sexual orientation.

As professionals working to educate and support young people, there is scant support and education available to us. There are guidelines on how to deal with young people and sex, often produced locally, and too vague to be anything other than confusing and contradictory. We have a duty of care to the young people we work with, and we are expected to keep them safe and supported. Yet, this 'care' is often seen to be threatened by the mere acknowledgement of sexuality or sexual desire, and so we err on the side of caution, and fudge the issues or avoid it altogether. If we are not careful, we risk living in a society where we can only support young people around the damaging physical and medical consequences of sex (such as unplanned pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, terminations, and rape and sexual abuse) but where we are unable to discuss the other aspects of sexual health and wellbeing, such as whether you want to have sex, how, when and with whom. In trying to downplay the importance of these elements we may inadvertently be making the situation worse and leaving young people to work it all out for themselves, with the increased level of risk that this entails.

In addition, we are still living in a society laced with homophobia, heterosexism and other prejudices. Very few lesbian, gay or bisexual or transsexual teachers are open in their workplace; on school curricula, well known academics, artists, writers, scientists, philosophers and so on are separated from their sexual orientations; media portrayals of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) people are limited to camp comedy or tragic documentary. Try to name a gay newsreader, a sympathetic lesbian storyline, or a politician whose career hasn't been dragged through the tabloids as a result of his or her sexual orientation. (For a particularly pertinent

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example of such tabloid trash, investigate Lowri Turner's recent article¹ on why gay men shouldn't lead the country.)

Currently, one of the biggest insults that can be thrown at something or someone by young people is that it is 'gay', ie broken, not cool, wrong. Despite the much-discussed rise of 'metrosexuality', homophobia is alive and kicking in our environment. It may be 'cool' to snog your best mate at a party, for Emo boys to cry and wear eyeliner, or for young men to moisturise and style, but to actually be gay, lesbian, bisexual or trans, well, that's just . . . erm, well, gay. And please don't talk about it in front of any grown ups. It will scare them.

I was recently told by a teacher that there were 'no gay students in this school! This prompted two responses in my head, although both went unspoken. Firstly, that the teacher regarded having gay students as negative and problematic; and second, that she was living in cloud cuckoo land, if she really believed this to be true. I will give her the benefit of the doubt and assume that she meant that there were no openly gay students in her school. That someone who has always been otherwise supportive and professional and committed to her work, and to young people, can make such a comment gives us some indication of the lack of awareness around issues with young people and sexual orientation, and of the distance that we still have to travel in order to address these issues.

The vast majority of LGBT people I know were not 'out' at school, and all of them cite negative attitudes, the prevalence of unchallenged homophobia, and the threat of verbal abuse and physical harm as significant factors in their decisions to keep their sexual orientation secret. This in spite of the fact that all young people have a right to be safe at school, and despite sexual orientation being included (in some cases implicitly) in school anti-bullying policies or codes of conduct. This is clearly not the same as saying that there are no LGBT people, or that young people either have no particular sexual orientation or that they are 'too young to know what they like'. In my experience of working with both LGBT young people and adults, I can only think of one or two examples of people who were unsure of or who were questioning their sexual orientations throughout secondary school; the overwhelming majority knew how they felt from a very early age.

The difficulties facing young LGBT people are numerous and interrelated. The most evident is the lack of resources that deal with sexual orientation, such as leaflets in libraries, or sessions on sexuality as part of the Sex and Relationships Education curriculum. Second, there is the issue of the lack of specialist professional and pastoral support for young LGBT people, with few professionals receiving even basic training or awareness-raising of sexuality issues. Also, many young LGBT people do not have



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the luxury, initially at least, of parental or family support, or of being able to share their feelings with friends. Add to that the additional anxieties of a homophobic environment, peer pressure to 'fit in', and being isolated from other LGBT young people, and it becomes more obvious why there may apparently not be any LGBT students in schools.

Young LGBT people may find themselves in a uniquely complex dilemma over issues of bullying, prejudice and finding support mechanisms – a dilemma not experienced in the same way by people who are the objects of racism, sexism or other excuses for mistreatment and discrimination – and that is the dilemma of disclosure. Disclosure is often necessary, or at least sensible, in order to avoid confusion or embarrassment, and be able to share something of ourselves with other people honestly and fully. The decision to tell other people about our sexuality is almost exclusive to members of LGBT communities, and is not a common experience for heterosexual individuals. Sexual orientation, unlike many other elements of our identities, is not a particularly visible one (contrary to what we may hear about 'you can always tell a gay' or similar comments), and this brings its own challenges. If someone is being bullied because of their race, for example, they do not have to disclose their ethnic heritage or 'prove' or 'be sure of' their ethnic identity in order to obtain help and support in sorting the situation out. Also, if a racist incident occurs, it is likely to be taken seriously and to be deemed to be unacceptable. This is sadly not always true of homophobic discrimination and bullying, where a young person will have to out themselves in order to report the offence, is likely to be asked if they are 'sure' they are gay, and the offence itself is less

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A successful outcome to reports of homophobia is made even more fragile by the heterosexist (and often implicit) view that heterosexuality is in some way superior to any other sexual orientation. Take, by way of example, the following exchange that took place between myself and a Year 10 student at the end of a session on sexuality. (I had ended the session by asking for the young people's decisions on what my sexual orientation was.)

Young Person: I'd rather not say, Miss.

Me: OK.

YP: I don't want to offend you.

Me: Why would you offend me?

YP: (nervously) 'Cause I think you're a lesbian.

Me: And why would that offend me?

YP: 'Cause you might not be.

Interestingly, although the young person was at pains not to 'mistake' a heterosexual woman for a lesbian (and to thereby offend her), it didn't occur to anyone in the group that they may cause offence by mistaking a lesbian for a heterosexual.

In terms of an amusing way to end a lesson and to challenge a few preconceptions, this is all well and good, but in terms of how life is for many closeted LGBT young people, it is certainly no laughing matter. Many comments I hear and many attitudes I experience are far more offensive and explicit, as well as being wholly inaccurate. If what I heard in classrooms was true, we would live in a world where gay men have neither the time nor the inclination for anything but anal sex, or are paedophiles; lesbians exist only in pornography, secretly desiring the intervention of a 'real man' into their sex lives; and where anything else (for this, include bisexuality, S&M, transsexuality, game show drag queens, transvestism, erectile dysfunction and everything else, all rolled into one) is simply too complicated or doesn't exist. However, dig a little deeper, spend a little more time talking with young people, and a different story emerges. Questions slowly pop out: How do you know if someone's gay? My mate's gay and really unhappy. What can I do to help? What do lesbians do in bed? Why do some people have anal sex? Why do some people hate gay people so much? And so on.

This level of discussion takes time, and can only happen in a safe, non-judgmental environment, with respect and openness. If you start to unpick something, it eventually unravels by itself. If you talk about things, people's attitudes can be challenged, and other points of view encouraged to flourish. And that is one of the important shifts in thinking that is needed if we are to effectively support LGBT young people. To do this involves a multi-level approach, from high-level policy decisions through to grass roots, integrated working practices. First, the government needs to take a far more robust line with regards to the inclusion of sexual orientation issues in the Sex and Relationships Education curriculum, which needs to be embraced (rather than feared or ignored) by school governors,

parents, support workers and teachers. Educational establishments (and indeed society as a whole) need to take the issue of homophobic bullying seriously and include it explicitly in all equal opportunities policies, strategies and documentation. It should be recognised that the damage and upset caused by not tackling this issue effectively has a significant effect on the health, wellbeing and educational achievements of LGBT young people.

Second, teachers and all professionals working with young people (and not just LGBT young people) should receive training around sexual orientation, and be aware of how to deal with it and who to refer and signpost to. We should not assume that because a young person has said nothing about being LGBT that this means they are heterosexual. Any education or discussion around sexual orientation, sexual health, relationships and so on should be inclusive and not just centred around heterosexual marriage and parenting. Professionals should also have access to good quality LGBT resources, and should know how to effectively deal with any issues which may arise from their work (eg how to answer questions such as 'Does that mean you're gay then, Sir?').

Finally, we can all work towards challenging stereotypes and attitudes and reducing levels of homophobia. We can also seek to be good role models ourselves, whether gay, straight, bisexual or trans, for those young people around us. At a time in their lives when sex in all its rich and varied forms is such a huge deal for young people, we should be there to advise, encourage, support and enlighten them, not to query, stereotype, dismiss or condemn them to a dangerous and silent repression of what would otherwise be a rewarding and meaningful integral part of life and identity. ■

Reference

1 Turner L. However much I love my gay friends, I don't want them running the country. *Western Mail*; 27/1/06. http://icwales.icnetwork.co.uk/0100news/columnists/tm_objectid=16632855%26method=full%26siteid=50082-name_page.html#story_continue

Further reading

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Mastoon A. *The shared heart: portraits and stories celebrating lesbian, gay and bisexual young people*. New York: Harper Collins; 2001.

Owens R. *Queer kids: the challenges and promise for lesbian, gay and bisexual youth*. New York: Harrington Park; 1998.

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