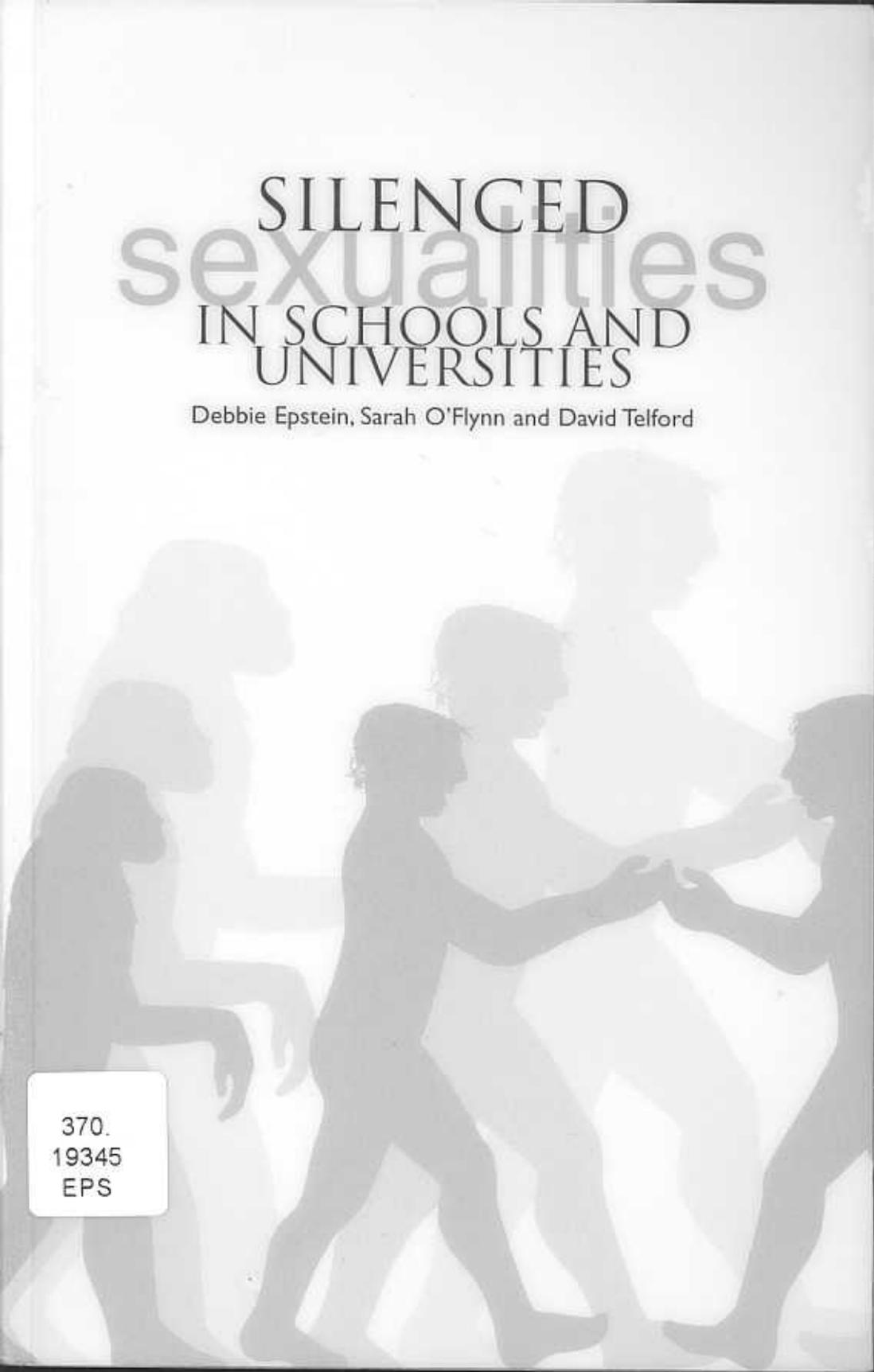


# SILENCED sexualities IN SCHOOLS AND UNIVERSITIES

Debbie Epstein, Sarah O'Flynn and David Telford



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EPS

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*This book is dedicated to the memory  
of Sue Lees, whose life's work on women  
and girls, sex and sexuality helped pave  
the way for this book*

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Silenced Sexualities or the Love(s) that won't Shut up!<sup>1</sup>

#### What is sex and relationship education?

It is lifelong learning about physical, moral and emotional development. It is about the understanding of the importance of marriage for family life, stable and loving relationships, respect, love and care. It is also about the teaching of sex, sexuality, and sexual health. It is not about the promotion of sexual orientation or sexual activity – this would be inappropriate teaching. (DHEE 2000: 5, para. 9)

The sense of anxiety emanating from the Department for Education and Employment's (DHEE)<sup>2</sup> reply to its own question 'What is sex and relationship education?' encapsulates much of what this book is about. Underpinning the statement is, on the one hand, a political will to prop up the ailing institution of heterosexual marriage and, on the other, extreme anxiety about the high level of teenage pregnancies (supposedly 'unwanted', though the question is seldom asked 'unwanted by whom?'). Marriage is seen as a Western, Judeo-Christian form of lifelong, monogamous coupling via a legal contract, specifically for the purposes of procreation, kinship, property ownership and inheritance.<sup>3</sup> The subtext can be paraphrased something like this:

People, throughout their life-course, need to learn to control their bodies and (sexual) morality. We are concerned that this currently does not happen. Sex and relationship education, therefore, must privilege a particular form of marriage that is heterosexual, monogamous and reproductive. It must teach that stable and loving relationships, respect, love and care are available only (or, at least,

primarily) within the bounds of a legally binding marriage contract recognised by the state in late capitalist Judeo-Christian countries. It is concerned with biological difference between males and females, reproduction and the prevention of pregnancy and disease. It should discourage sexual activity, except within legal marriages for reproduction and should not mention the possibility of pleasure (which might be interpreted as the promotion of sexual activity). Only non-heterosexual people have a sexual orientation, and this may be tolerated but not celebrated. Forms of heterosexuality that do not follow the marriage prescription are also undesirable. In other words, those non-normative versions of sexuality should remain silent or, at the very least, not too noisy.

This book is concerned to pull out and analyse the threads of sexuality in educational institutions and the ways that normative heterosexuality is promoted, sustained and made to appear totally natural. It arises out of work we have all done previously, working both together and separately (for example, Epstein, O'Hynn, and Telford 2001; 2002), extending and developing that writing. It reviews the literature and presents our own research on three key phases of education: primary school, secondary or high school and university.<sup>1</sup> The overall argument of the book concerns the naturalisation of heterosexuality and the playing out of sexualities in relation to other differences that make a difference; we are particularly interested in exploring the inter-relations of sexuality, disability, ethnicity, class and gender. The enormity of these themes means that our treatment of them is uneven, but we try to hold a range of 'differences that make a difference' in mind throughout. There is also a particular unevenness in the gendering of our discussions in some chapters. Sarah's research is specifically with young women, so her examples in chapters four and five tend to be about women. David's work is with young gay men, so most of the young people whose stories he tells in chapters six and seven are men. However, we hope that, taken as a whole, the book does deal with gender in a way that takes account of the experiences of both girls/women and boys/men. A key issue for us overall is the way that sexualities, nuanced by other social differences, are manufactured in/by schools and universities.

In this context, we are using the term 'sexuality' to talk about something much more broadly understood than simply 'sex' or 'sexual relationships'. It is our premise that sexuality is not the property of an individual and is not a hormonally or biologically given, inherent quality. Rather sexual cultures and sexual meanings are constructed through a range of discursive practices across social institutions including schools. Thus, when we talk about 'sexuality' we are talking about a whole assemblage of heterogeneous practices, techniques, habits, dispositions, forms of training and so on that govern things like dating and codes of dress in particular situations. This assemblage is shaped partly by questions of age. Thus primary school children may be strongly invested in heterosexual forms and may talk about boyfriends and girlfriends, for example, or about who they fancy, but the meanings they give to this kind of talk and practice is usually different from that of secondary school students and adults. Age, in this context, is also a discursive space framed by our understandings of what it means to be a 'child', a 'teenager', an 'undergraduate', an 'adult' and so on. All these categories have socially and culturally constructed meanings, which can, and do, change in different historical, geographical, institutional and political locations.

We argue here that – with some exceptions that we discuss in the body of the book – there is an official silence about all kinds of sexuality in the vast majority of mainstream schools and universities in anglophone countries. And where sexuality is permitted, sometimes even encouraged, the form of sexuality allowed is the straightest of straight versions. At the same time, sexualities of all kinds pervade educational institutions, with their effects unrecognised, because their very existence is contentious and contested. We carry this argument through an examination of primary and secondary schooling, into a consideration of higher education. Here, we see a change in that sexuality is recognised as something that students legitimately do, and which may be included in social sciences and humanities courses at least, but where young people's new found freedoms are not as emancipatory as they might have hoped.

### Discursive framing of different phases of education

Schools and universities are places where education of, for the most part, the young takes place. This happens not only in the official spaces of curriculum and classroom but also in the micro- (and often unofficial) cultures of students, teachers and others connected with particular sites (for example, Local Education Authorities and governing bodies in the UK, School Councils in Australia and School Boards in the United States). All phases of education share certain features: some people (teachers) are meant to be passing knowledge to others (students); they are places where learning is institutionalised; they all have transient populations of students, though staff may stay for longer or shorter periods of time; and they are all places where appropriate knowledges are defined, taught, measured and examined (Foucault 1977). There are also significant differences between the different phases. These are related to the age of the students and to notions of child and adolescent development. We are not, however, lending our support to developmental discourses. In choosing to treat the different phases of formal education chronologically (starting with primary, going on to secondary and finishing with higher education), we have produced a kind of 'biographical' account of educational processes and of sexuality within them. We do not provide any single biography, of course, but we hope and believe that readers will see at least some of their own experiences, and those of people they know, represented and explored in recognisable ways.

When considering sexuality in education 'appropriate knowledge' is especially contested, particularly during the compulsory years of schooling. The particular negotiations that take place vary from country to country. These negotiations are partly the result of different formations of 'left' and 'right', of the relative power of the 'moral majority' and a discourse of 'sexual liberalism', and the power of religion compared to that of civil/secular society. In this book, we take the British context as a case study of such negotiations, though we draw on much of the English language literature from other countries as well.

The past twenty years have seen the imposition of marketisation and managerialism on schools (Epstein and Kenway 1996; Gewirtz,

Ball, and Bowe 1995; Whitty 1994) and, more recently, public sector universities. In this context, success in the educational market depends on achievement in publicly recognisable forms, like examination results. Competitively driven education has consequences in a number of areas, including the ways that sexualities can be and are learnt and expressed within educational institutions. One such consequence is that investments of time and money by schools and universities are required to ensure greater publicly recognised achievement, which will in turn accrue more investment and funding, rather than on more controversial programmes of, for example, sexuality education or lesbian and gay studies. It is not just that such programmes might infringe the law as it stands, both in some US and Australian states and in the increasingly decentralised governments of the UK, but also that had publicity might have an impact on future funding. Therefore even when there are individuals with the power ostensibly to effect change within institutions, any attempt to do this is a very risky business (Bickmore 1999; Epstein 1997; Kaiser 1999; Silin 1995).

Without radically altered sex and relationship education programmes in schools (or as we would prefer, sexuality education), it is unlikely that more widely held heterosexist views will ever be challenged and yet it is necessary to secure that challenge before such programmes will be allowed. This is not necessarily easy to come by given the politics current across the range of English-speaking countries. In the UK, Australia and the US alike, a version of 'tolerance' seems to be the best that non-heterosexual (or non-normatively heterosexual) people can expect. And, as Epstein and Steinberg (1998) have pointed out, such 'tolerance' often takes the form of what they have labelled 'liberal intolerance'. For example, in an article in the influential British tabloid, the *Daily Mail* (January 23rd 2000) the then leader of the UK Conservative Party, William Hague, made clear his views in favour of maintaining Section 28<sup>3</sup> (Hague 2000). Underpinning these views was a particular definition of 'tolerance'. Mr Hague eccentrically defined it as 'the need for a minority to accept the views of the majority'. It is this principle which governs much policy around sex education in schools and indeed, as David shows in chapters six and seven, in

universities as well. (Foucault 1978) has documented the historical processes whereby sexuality has come to occupy the central position of a person's identity in contemporary Western society. As Ken Plummer (1995) observes in the introduction to his important book *Telling Sexual Stories*, 'Sex has become the Big Story'. It is for this reason that sex education has become such a battleground and the need to shore up heterosexuality is perceived to be crucial to the maintenance of other key institutions.

Despite many constraints and silences, schools and universities do have spaces where (hetero-)sexualities are not only permitted but actually required in either formal or informal contexts. In the early years of education, the 'home corner' provides a space for children's fantasies of heterosexual family, while primary school children need a certain 'sexual literacy' about, for example, desirable pop stars and athletes in the pursuit of friendship (Ali 2002, see also chapters two and three of this book). In secondary schools, the 'prom' or school disco provide a space where, however uncomfortably, students are expected to interact, producing themselves as feminine and masculine in iconically heterosexual and exaggerated ways. The heterosexualisation of this process is often unremarked and young people are seen generally within a discourse of 'normal' gender development. However, the homophobia endemic in schools and directed particularly at those young men who are alternatively masculine, makes it clear that heterosexuality is indeed compulsory. At the same time, certain young women have to work hard to hold their present sexuality at a distance so that their identities as learners are not compromised by expectations of feminine heterosexuality (see chapters four and five).

Heterosexually successful school students often make a successful transition into the heterosexual economies of colleges and universities. The clubs and societies of British, Australian and New Zealand universities and the fraternities and sororities of the United States and Canada are places where heterosexual credentials must be proved, for popularity depends on this. Without such heterosexual credentials, young queer students find themselves excluded from 'the university life'; from informal networks of learning; and sites of informal cultural exchange. This means they often do not know

what is going on nor do they have access to the 'in' stories. Such exclusions are painful and for young people who are already disadvantaged by locations of class or ethnicity or disability, for example, it may be impossible to sustain a queer identity, when a heterosexual one provides them with a key strategy for inclusion. In this way a rehearsal of normative heterosexual adulthood is implicitly coerced from students (see chapter six and seven).

It would, however, be a mistake to assume that there is no room for manoeuvre in educational institutions. As Gramsci (1995) pointed out, hegemony is never total or, in more Foucauldian terms, where there is power, there is always resistance (Foucault 1977, 1980). Schools, colleges and universities are also sites of cultural struggle. Power does not operate simply in one direction. All of us, in our research, have come across pockets of opposition to dominant forms of power. Often the ways in which discourses around sexuality, learning, age, class and ethnicity are configured in the micro-politics of the classroom or the school or university allow for quite powerful resistances to happen. These may in the end be disarmed by the institution but they do show that the institution is being challenged. A key strategy of institutions to retain power seems to be to allow protest but to contain it in particular areas. As Steinberg (1997) points out, speech is zoned, and so, too, are forms of embodiment. What can be said, enacted or embodied in some places, is not possible in others. Thus, in some educational locations and within some discourses it is possible to speak about sex and sexuality, to be queer, to inhabit embodied non-normative sexual identities (Butler 1993). However closets are often built around these locations, which afford protection on the one hand but limit the challenge to the institution on the other. As Sedgwick (1990: 68) suggests, the closet is a 'shaping presence' in the lives of all queer people and all marginalised sexual identities are rendered intelligible through the workings of the closet.

### Writing and reading the book

Before going on to introduce the rest of the book, there is a need to add a note about the terminology we use. In particular, we wish to explain our use of the terms 'queer', 'gay', 'lesbian', and 'LGBT'

(lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender/sexual). We recognise that meanings are always contested and certainly, not everyone likes the word 'queer'. Reasons for disliking 'queer' include the history of its use as a term of abuse. It also helps to solidify a stereotype, already in place, of the flamboyant, decadent, effeminate 'poof'. In addition, many lesbians feel excluded by the word, which can often be used to indicate gay male rather than women's experiences. When the silence around lesbianism has generally been so resounding, it may be seen as politically compromising to drop 'lesbian' in favour of 'queer'. Moreover we do not wish to forget an important history of radical feminist and separatist lesbian politics. While we may have always had, and continue to have, reservations about these politics, we do not wish to disown it or to deny its impact on later thinking, including that of many queer theorists (see and cf. Sedgwick c1997).

However, we have chosen to use the word 'queer' in this book for several reasons. First, we find the litany of identities, 'lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, transsexual' awkward to use, breaking the flow of writing. Furthermore, any listing of this kind – what Michael Warner calls 'Rainbow Theory' (Warner 1993: xix) – is always and inevitably exclusive. As other political and/or marginalised voices make themselves heard, the silences of such mantras become increasingly obvious. In addition, as Warner points out, such listings can lead to secondary exclusions or to the solidifying and reification of 'difference' and identity. Second, the use of the word 'queer' suggests something more of the fluidity of sexual identities that we would argue exists amongst both heterosexual and non-heterosexual people. In this context, a key purpose of this book is to 'queer' heterosexuality, making the familiar strange and asking readers to think again about how they conceptualise 'the normal'. Third, while we are probably more materialist in our analysis than many queer theorists, we do think that language and discourse are politically important, and we are certainly indebted to queer theory for much of our thinking.

There are, however, some points in the book at which we feel the need for more specific terminology than the term 'queer'. Where we wish to speak specifically about the experiences of women who

identify as lesbian, we use the word 'lesbian'. Similarly, where we are talking specifically about men who identify as gay, we use 'gay'. When deploying the terms 'lesbian' and 'gay', we are careful not only to differentiate between the experience of women and men but also to recognise that there are differences within groups of lesbians and of gay men. We use the abbreviation 'LGBT' only in those contexts where we are discussing the formation of specific social and political groups (for example, in universities) which define themselves in this way.

Throughout the book, we draw on the work of Foucault (1977; 1978; 1980), in particular in our use of the term 'discourse'. We use 'discourse' to mean not only language but also ways of understanding what are normal and natural in particular contexts. 'Discourses', 'discursive strategies' and 'discursive frameworks' all refer to ways in which power is deployed and pervades social, institutional and cultural spaces. They constrain what people do and understand and constitute a pressure towards the construction of particular kinds of identity.<sup>6</sup>

It is important for readers of this book to understand a little about our backgrounds. Debbie has been researching issues to do with sexuality and education since 1990, when she left teaching and advisory work to become an academic. She is David's and Sarah's PhD supervisor. All three of us are experienced teachers in schools. Debbie's background is in early years and primary education in London, Hertfordshire and Birmingham, England. Sarah has taught English secondary schools in London and now works primarily with vulnerable young people in Year Eleven, the last year of compulsory schooling. She has a particular interest in young women whose needs are seldom met by schools. David was a teacher of economics and social sciences in secondary schools in Melbourne, Australia. After four years in London he is back in Melbourne where he teaches in the Faculty of Education at Deakin University. All three of us have researched sexuality and education in the secondary phase of schooling. However, Debbie has recently been researching in primary schools, Sarah's doctoral research is about young women in secondary schools, and David's is about young men in universities. Since we wanted to cover the full range of

formal education, we have chosen to split the drafting of the book according to our current primary research interests. Despite our focus on formal education, we are very aware of the importance of the informal pedagogies of popular culture and family life. These fall outside our current remit, but it should be noted that all formal education takes place within the context of people's lived experience and everyday lives.

We have talked extensively about this work and share the arguments that we will make throughout the book. However, the different voices will be detectable in the different chapters and we have made no effort to disguise this. Each of us has used 'I' in the chapters we have drafted, rather than referring to ourselves by our names, which felt awkward. Thus, the 'I' of chapters two and three is Debbie, of chapters four and five is Sarah and of chapters six and seven is David. The introduction and conclusion (chapters one and eight) have been jointly written.

Chapter two, "Children should be . . .": normalising heterosexuality in the primary school' was written by Debbie. In it, she argues that primary schools are sites for the production and enforcement of normative heterosexuality and 'stable marriages' for the purposes of procreation, love and security. She identifies 'childhood innocence' or, as she shows, 'childhood ignorance' as a key discourse in this process. Using a combination of a literature review and data derived from ethnographies of primary schools in London and Birmingham, she shows how sexualities produce and are produced by other differences such as those of ethnicity/race, class and gender.

Debbie also wrote chapter three, "'I've no idea how to do it": sex education and teachers' fears'. In this chapter, she shows how teachers are placed in an invidious and anxiety-producing position by a combination of lack of training and absence of clarity over what is and is not permitted within formal sex education. This is compounded by an often scant understanding of the informal cultures and pre-existing understandings of sex and sexuality amongst the children and young people they teach. She explores some of the difficulties this produces in teaching sex and relation-

ship education in primary schools and argues for a broader sexuality education in place of sex education.

In chapter four, 'From the Outside, Looking in: Doing sexuality in secondary schools', Sarah continues to develop themes around sexuality education. She continues the argument that sex education in its current forms does not meet the needs of young people, regardless of their sexual identities. She proposes that sexuality education in secondary schools should be developed to include the introduction to writings about sexuality by major theorists and researchers on sexuality. In this way, the study of major ways of thinking about sexuality would enable young people to place their own lived experience in broader contexts and move the curriculum away from narrow concerns about health and morality, which neither speak to young people nor answer their serious and naïve questions.

In contrast, in chapter five, 'Bodies that Learn: Negotiating education success through the management of sexuality', Sarah focuses on how the possibility of education and the possibility of sexuality come together in the students' bodies. Through an examination of the non-normative heterosexualities of a group of Somali young women, she shows forcefully that the only freely permitted sexuality is normatively based on the expectation of 'happy, heterosexual, monogamous families'. In this context, she demonstrates that young women may fashion their bodies as learners in ways which hold heterosexuality in abeyance in order to empower themselves to learn.

In chapter six, 'Post-Compulsory Heterosexuality: Silences and tensions of curricula and pedagogy in universities', David explores the nature of what he terms the 'queer climate' for faculty members and students in universities, tracing how this is influenced by legal, financial and structural issues. While he detects a certain degree of change in terms of the inclusion of queer students and staff in universities in the UK and elsewhere, he argues that these changes are largely superficial. They leave assumptions about the inevitability and normality of heterosexuality largely unchallenged and do not subvert or 'queer' the university as a site of cultural struggle.

David also wrote chapter seven, 'The University Challenge: Transition to university'. He examines the expectations and experiences of young people moving from schools into higher education institutions. He uncovers the tensions between queer students' expectations of sexual freedom and the continuing regulatory heterosexual framework that governs their university lives. He explores how gender and ethnicity, as well as their geographical location, shape these experiences. David concludes by arguing that the superficial changes to policy intended to be inclusive of the needs of non-heterosexuals (discussed in the previous chapter) has not produced significant changes in the lives of queer students. Indeed, he shows that the heterosexual assumptions of primary and secondary schools are also embedded within higher education.

Our interest in this book is in understanding the places where sexualities can be said to 'reside' and the forms they are able to take in these differently structured institutions of education. More than that, we are concerned with the often punitive way in which particular versions of heterosexuality are naturalised and enforced. The very force with which normative versions of heterosexuality are sustained through these different phases of education suggests their fragility. This is evidenced throughout the book in our analysis of the anxieties produced amongst teachers and students when heterosexuality is not done or is done differently. This anxiety is also apparent in the determination encountered to get (hetero-) sexuality 'right' and yet, simultaneously, to refrain from speaking about the necessity of doing so. Thus, the threat to stability, highlighted by the existence and stigmatisation of 'queer', comes from the very fragility we have identified. In important ways, the compulsion of heterosexuality is a pervasive, silent and often denied power that permeates formal education.

In the conclusion to the book, we bring together the threads of the three different sections. We outline some possible ways of making a difference, queering heterosexuality in educational institutions, and placing it alongside other differences that make a difference within formal education. The relationship to these is complex and often sensitive, but we believe that this book presents a strong argument for the inclusion of sexuality, nuanced by other

differences, as a key element in how young people experience their education.

## Notes

1. This title is taken from Plummer (1992) where he notes that, from having been the 'love that dare not speak its name' in 1890s, homosexuality had become 'the love that can't shut up' by the 1990s.
2. The Government Department responsible for education in the UK is now called the Department for Education and Skills (DfES)
3. Of course, much the same can be said of Islam, both in its Western and non-Western versions.
4. Unfortunately, we have not been able to cover Early Years education here. This is not because we believe sexuality to be irrelevant in the Early Years, but because we were drawing on research projects based within the sectors we do discuss. However, there is a need for research with much younger children about the issues covered in this book.
5. Section 28 infamously prohibits Local Authorities (that is, local government) from 'promoting homosexuality', labelling same-sex relationships as being 'pre-tended family relationships'. When the Thatcher government in 1988 passed the Section, there were protests in the UK and nearly all the 'western democracies'. The Government was finally defeated in the House of Lords on the repeal of Section 28 at the end of July 2000. It seems unlikely that a further attempt to repeal the Section will be made before the next general election in Britain.
6. For a fuller discussion of the meaning of 'discourse', see Epstein and Johnson (1998: 15–16).
7. Debbie would like to thank the Economic and Social Research Council for funding her research project on 'Children's Relationship Cultures in Years 5 and 6' (Award Number R 000237438) and the other members of the research team involved in that project: Mary Kehily, Martin Mae an Ghall and Peter Redman. Mary Kehily carried out the field work in the Birmingham school, Debbie in one of the London schools and both of them in the second London school.

## CHAPTER TWO

### 'Children should be . . .': Normalising heterosexuality in the primary school

'If anyone knows anything about anything,' said Bear to himself, 'it's Owl who knows something about something, or my name's not Winnie-the-Pooh,' he said. 'Which it is,' he added. 'So there you are.' (Milne 1958: 55)

#### Introduction

We have argued in the introduction to this book that schools and universities are places where heterosexuality is normalised and thus made compulsory by a variety of means that change through the different phases of education. In this chapter, the argument is that a key way in which normative heterosexuality is maintained and enforced in primary schools is through the notion of childhood innocence. This, as will be shown, is in large part a call for ignorance. Unlike Owl, 'who knows something about something', children are supposed to know nothing, especially about sexuality, if they are to maintain their status as innocents. The chapter will proceed to argue that children not only need to but do 'know something about something', that, in fact, sexuality is a pervasive theme of classrooms and playgrounds. This will be demonstrated through ethnographic evidence from both classroom and playgrounds in three primary schools (two in London and one in Birmingham) and by drawing on the published evidence from other researchers in the UK and other English-speaking countries. It is important to note, in this context, that sexualities are not only institutionally produced in particular ways but are gendered, raced and classed (see also Nayak 1999).

Not only are children in primary/elementary schools already knowledgeable about and interested in sexuality in a whole host of different ways but schools are suffused with sexuality. As we show in this chapter, children use the discourses of heterosexuality that abound in playgrounds and classrooms as a resource for identity making. They can draw on these discourses in the making and breaking of friendships, in the investments they make in different versions of themselves as girls and boys and in their relationships with adults. Indeed, sex education takes place not only in the official school curriculum but also within pupil cultures through processes of social learning. These, however, take place in a context in which compulsory heterosexuality is pervasive, with pupils and teachers alike imbued with heterosexually imagined futures. The final argument in this chapter is that some children in primary/elementary school classrooms can be seen to 'carry' the sexuality for whole classes, an argument that Epstein and Johnson (1998: see, especially, chapter 5) have previously made in relation to secondary/high schools. This final part focuses on the performances of heterosexuality engaged in by certain children, which others can use as a focus for their own fantasies of romance, marriage and future family life.

#### **Suffer little children: myths of childhood innocence**

Young children, according to common sense understandings, are innocent. They neither do, nor should they know anything about sexuality. The fear is that contemporary children 'grow up too soon' or are 'not yet ready' for sexual knowledges. In the emotionally charged words of John Patten (*Daily Mail* 24 March 1994), then Conservative Secretary of State for Education in the UK, children 'should not even be thinking about beginning to be understanding, never mind understanding' particular items of sexual knowledge. This is a pervasive theme in debates about sexuality and sex education in anglophone countries. John Patten's views are shared by the so-called moral majority of the United States, by the right wing tabloid and broadsheet press of the UK,<sup>1</sup> and by moral traditionalist groups in Australia and New Zealand.

In contrast, feminists, sex educators and others, have long argued that not only is 'childhood innocence' an excuse for keeping young

children ignorant but it is dangerous to them (see and cf. Silin 1995). As long ago as 1982, Stevi Jackson (1982), pointed out that the notion of childhood innocence was a way of keeping children ignorant and thereby both denying them access to power and justifying their powerlessness. Children, she suggested, are not allowed to deny adults the right to touch or kiss them in situations which are not perceived as abusive. How many young children have been told to 'kiss X or Y goodbye' when they would rather not do so? Similarly, she pointed out, women are more likely to be touched by men without invitation than *vice versa*, employees are more likely to be touched by employers, and so on. Jenny Krutinger (1988; 1990) took this argument further, calling for a critique of the way the concept of 'childhood innocence' is used in the treatment (by the media, for example) of child sexual abuse. She argued that this supposed 'innocence' itself constituted a form of eroticization of children, making it titillating and exciting. On the other hand, she suggested, children who have been sexually abused lose their innocence (since they are no longer ignorant) and become fair game, legitimate victims of abusers. Thus, an eight year old girl can be described by a High Court judge as being 'no angel' and men who abuse can get off with extremely light sentences on the grounds that the 'knowing' child tempted them and led them on.

Of course, as Stevi Jackson (1999) argues, the ideology of childhood innocence is profoundly gendered. It is little *girls* who are simultaneously (hetero-) sexualized and required to retain their innocence. Writing about a television documentary on little girls who take part in beauty pageants, Jackson says:

The little girl [in the beauty pageant] is just acting out a more stylised version of the usual little girl performance – and in one sense knows nothing about sexuality while in another knows a great deal. She is probably ignorant about the mechanics of heterosexual sex, yet she knows that being attractive, flirtatious and cute wins a positive response from adults – and little girls know this even if they don't enter beauty contests. (Jackson 1999: 139)

While we would agree with Jackson that the sexualization of young children is highly gendered, it is important to remember that little

boys are also inscribed within discourses of heterosexuality. The extreme femininity of little girls may construct them as hetero/sex objects, but little boys are required to prove that they are 'real boys' in ways that mark them as masculine, even macho, and therefore (by definition) heterosexual. Furthermore, as Valerie Walkerdine (1996; 1997) has argued, the eroticization of little girls is profoundly classed (and we would add racialized) as well as gendered.

We would also agree with the claim made by Kirzinger and Jackson that discourses of childhood innocence are profoundly damaging to children (girls *and* boys). The moral traditionalist claim that knowing about sexuality constitutes the corruption of children is, moreover, profoundly anti-educational. As Jonathan Silin so powerfully argues:

Unlike some, I do not want to protect children from pain during a romanticized period of innocence, nor do I see children as a way to purchase immortality. Rather I want to argue that too much of the contemporary curriculum brings a deadly silence to the being of childhood and not enough of it speaks to the things that really matter in children's lives or in the lives of those who care for them. I want to argue that the curriculum has too often become an injunction to desist rather than an invitation to explore our life worlds. The curriculum remains lifeless as long as it is cut off from the roots and connections that feed it. (Silin 1995: 40)

Silin is writing here about death and dying, specifically from AIDS. However, much the same could be said about sexuality – and, indeed, Silin supports this view in his important book.

Claiming that children know a great deal about sexuality does not necessarily imply that they all know the same things. Their previous experiences and local cultures will strongly influence what they know and believe and they will bring to school all kinds of different experiences in relation to sexuality.

#### Knowing girls, knowing boys: young children's (hetero)sexual discourses

Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli quotes her daughter Steph's writing about taking part in Sydney's annual queer celebration, *Mardi Gras*:

I go to Sydney sometimes especially at Mardi Gras time and have fun with Mum and her friends. We go to interesting shops and restaurants. I was in the Mardi Gras one year pretending to be Alan and Malcolm's daughter. I wore my purple fairy costume and waved a wand and a gay flag. Lots of people took pictures and I was on the news. At first I was shy because there were so many people and I forgot to wave. Then I started waving. Before it was our turn to move, I saw my Mum waving to me from where her dancing group was getting ready to join in the Parade.

I love my life. It's exciting. (Stephanie Pallotta-Chiarolli, quoted in Pallotta-Chiarolli 1999b: 72)

But one does not have to be the 'queerly raised' (to use Pallotta-Chiarolli's term) daughter of an Italian Australian family to be aware of questions of sexuality in primary/elementary schools. As the work of Emma Renold (1999; 2000) shows, sexuality pervades primary school playgrounds and classrooms and children draw on it as resource for constructing themselves as boys and as girls. This takes a variety of forms that can include:

- imaginative games involving heterosexual family life (Epstein *et al.* 2001a);
- talk about 'dating', 'dumping' and 'going out' (Epstein 1997a);
- name-calling and abuse of those who, for whatever reason do not 'fit' as properly masculine or feminine but perhaps particularly masculine (Boldt 1996; Connell 1989; Connolly 1995).

Research evidence from a variety of countries shows this to be the case across national borders and not only in schools populated by white, Anglo children (Pallotta-Chiarolli 1999b). Working in schools across the racial divide in South Africa, Deevia Bhana (2002) shows how children in all her research sites<sup>4</sup> deploy hetero/sexual discourses in their play and forms of abuse. She discusses the complex ways in which this places both boys and girls. For example, in the township school she studied, girls adopted a strategy of resistance to mocking and violent boys by acting out aggressive sexuality and investing in 'rudeness', lifting their dresses in concert to 'show their panties'. She says, of this cameo, that even though it takes place in the violent context of South African

schools where girls are at constant risk of rape and sexual assault by teachers and other pupils (Human Rights Watch 2001),

'Show me your panties' is an ambivalent moment which is shocking both in terms of its explicit sexual reference and the power it asserts over the troublesome boys. The girls who are cast as powerless, scared of boys in general . . . recast themselves as powerful in the public space of the school as they privately recast boys as powerless objects whom they humiliate through their performance. (Bhana 2002: 254)

Children, then, are neither ignorant nor innocent of sexual knowledges of various kinds. For the most part, they will not have the same ways of understanding sexualities within their micro-cultures as older people (adolescents and adults) do. But children's play and talk is profoundly heterosexualized. As Bronwyn Davies shows:

Heterosexuality is continually constructed in the children's talk as they separate and heighten the difference between themselves as male and female. So pervasive is this construction that even the most simple initiative on a girl's part, such as asking a boy for a pencil, can be overlaid with compromising (hetero)sexual meanings. The boys, in contrast are not compromised by (hetero)sexuality. (Davies 1993: 123)

In fact, for boys, what is compromising is homosexuality and, just as all kinds of actions can be interpreted as heterosexual when a girl does them, so a whole range of behaviours can be labelled 'gay' when a boy performs them. In my research in primary schools,<sup>3</sup> for example, a boy could be 'identified' as 'gay' for a whole range of reasons. For example, he might have been friendly with girls (that is, he had girls who were friends and not 'girlfriends'); he was studious; he did not like football or fighting; he wore the wrong trainers; or he was a bit nervous and showed it. Similarly, William Letts (1999) recounts how a boy who did not want to touch a cockroach in a science lesson was taunted as being a baby. As Letts comments:

Taunting boys who refuse to engage in activities that *even girls* can do is a common misogynist put-down strategy used against boys. But beyond this, it is also implicated in discourses of homophobia . . . because in Sam's case he is worse than a girl, he is a baby. This

infantilization of Sam seems to work to humiliate him, to police his own enactment of his heterogender and to coerce him into behaving in ways that boys are expected to behave in science class. (Letts IV 1999: 98, emphasis in original)

Pupils learn from each other, not only the forms of policing described above, but also a variety of strategies for understanding and finding out about sexualities. They are not simply passive recipients of teachers' information but makers of meaning, with all that that entails. What is particularly striking in Emma Renold's work (1999, 2000) is the extent to which the way children's agency cannot be second guessed; they are not who the teachers imagine them to be sexually or in other ways (see, also, Crowhurst 2001; Ellsworth 1997). Thus, as ethnographic work with young children shows, sexuality education is not just a matter of the formal curriculum. It takes place within friendship groups, nuanced and marked by ethnicity, class, disability and gender (at least), and in the 'little cultural worlds' which children inhabit in school and elsewhere.<sup>4</sup>

#### Playing out sexualities: children's friendships, heterosexuality and imagined futures

These studies demonstrate clearly how social differences shape and are shaped by each other within the context of friendships. Thus, as the *Children's Relationship Cultures* research project showed, sexualities are a resource for the making of friendship in ways which are profoundly gendered, ethnically marked and classed, while friendships amongst children are simultaneously key devices for the policing of sexualities and of gendered, classed and ethnic identities (Kehily *et al.* 2002; Redman *et al.* 2002). In writing about young white men, Anoop Nayak (1999) has shown how they 'do masculinity' through sexuality, ethnicity and class and *vice versa* (that is they 'do class' through sexuality, ethnicity and masculinity and so on) (see also Crowhurst 2001). The same could be said about young children in primary schools and this is often mediated through both same and opposite sex friendships.

The *Children's Relationship Cultures* project took place in two schools in London (one of them in a pilot study) and one in a large

city in central England. Here my colleagues and I were able to trace these processes in classrooms and playgrounds.<sup>5</sup> What was particularly striking to us was the intensity and hard work on identities that went into the play and talk through which these same sex and mixed-sex friendships were formed. For example, there were particular groups of girls in each school who constituted themselves as 'special friends': the 'diary group'; the 'band'; and the 'best friends'. In all three schools, these groups operated strongly around questions of sexuality and had explicit or implicit rules for membership. The 'diary group', for example, had a complicated set of rules which we described thus:

The diary group met in the school playground at lunchtime and play-time to discuss issues of mutual interest such as friends, boy/friends and puberty. Over time they devised a format for conducting their meetings, which consisted of deciding collectively on the topic of discussion and then allowing each member in turn to ask a question that the others must answer. Evading the question was not allowed and misleading responses were also not permitted. The structure of the meetings indicates that the group operate within clearly defined parameters through which discussion and silence were constantly regulated. The structure of diary group meetings can be seen as an appropriation of 'circle time' discussions in Personal and Social and Health Education where social learning is encouraged through themed talk and turn-taking. The name of the group appeared enigmatic . . . at first since no member of the group kept a diary, nothing was ever written down, and neither did members of the group bring along pieces of personal writing. However, in other ways the name 'diary group' can be seen metaphorically as a device that allows for the interplay of public and private. (Kehily *et al.* 2002: 170)

This group used its time to explore, through talk, issues to do with (hetero)sexuality which ranged from periods, to which boys each 'fancied' (a question which they also addressed to the researcher, Mary Jane Kehily), and fantasies about their classmates, their teacher and various public figures (for example, the England soccer captain, David Beckham) who constituted objects of desire. Girls and boys in schools in Durban, in the 'show me your panties' episode quoted above (Bhana 2002), used sexuality in what might

be termed the 'gender war' and for what Barrie Thorne (1993) has termed 'border work'. Similarly, our diary group recounted how both they and some of the boys in their class used sexuality to draw distinctions and oppositions between the sexes:

Selena: We were in line . . . for dinner . . . and I was running up to them [Ben and John] and they were shouting, 'Have you got your period', shouting real loud . . . It was like everyone's there, not only the juniors.

Sarah: It was everyone in the whole school.

Lakbiah: It's really embarrassing too.

Selena: Yes it was really embarrassing . . . and they sometimes call me tampon lady.

Lakbiah: And Selena made up a plan that she was going to go up to them and say, 'Have you had your' what? What was you going to say?

Selena: Have you had your sperm count or whatever it is.

As we can see in this quote, both boys and girls have agency here and both deploy what they see as embarrassing aspects of the other sex's sexual biology (periods and sperm) to gain points and establish themselves as powerful.

The Band used and developed its cohesion around singing and dancing songs they had written themselves and those that were currently popular. Although they claimed not to like the Spice Girls, it seemed that they based themselves very much on this group's style and popularity at the time (this was before the Spice Girls split up), drawing on images of 'girl power' and assertiveness to do so. They had considered a number of names for themselves, including 'Hot Babies', which they said they had rejected as sounding 'a bit too, you know, like, sexy', and 'Bad Girls', which they preferred, explaining to me that this use of 'bad' actually meant good. However, this name was also eventually rejected so that they ended up as, simply, 'The Band'. They sang a range of songs, all of them to do with love, loss and sexuality, from their favourite groups, and made up some of their own songs:

Donna: And then we done something like 'Get real you don't need him'. Remember that song?

DE: So you made up that song, and that song's about?

Donna: Losing someone.

DE: Losing someone you love?

Cherry: A boyfriend [giggles]

DE: So who, has anybody lost one?

Anna: Yeah

DE: Who's lost one?

Anna: Me.

Cherry: I lost Sam. I dumped him.

Donna: I lost this boy called Jake.

Beth: He was two-timing.

Donna: Yeah.

Cherry: Yeah, Sam was seven-timing.

DE: Seven timing?

[All giggle]

Cherry: Well, like going with Beth when he says he ain't going out with Beth, and then when he

Donna: Yeah, oh God

Cherry: He was going out with all of us like, not at the same time, but at different days, but he was going out with all of us, and then he, none of us knew, and then one day we found out because he said, 'Oh, oh we'll go out on Saturday at seven'. He said that to all of us, and we all turned up there.

Here the girls seem not to be at all distressed about Sam's two- (or seven-) timing activities. Rather, part of their friendship was con-

structed around talk and songs about Sam's infidelity, in ways that drew strongly on the popular music they liked. Similarly, the group of 'best friends' used complaints about the behaviour of boys, especially 'two-timing' as a strategy for group cohesion around shared experiences of (hetero)sexual romance.

Intense same sex friendships are often assumed not to exist amongst boys, or, where they do, may be seen as indications of (incipient) homosexuality. However, in the *Children's Relationship Cultures* project, we found that such friendships could indeed exist. We note (in Redman *et al.* 2002) the fluency with which these boys are able to deploy discourses of heterosexuality, solidifying their friendship in part through the objectification of girls and misogynist discourse:

Karl: All the girls that there have been in this, in this school over all the years have been rubbish.

Ben: I know they've been horrible. I don't like any of them. Cause like they're just horrible. They're not really like my type anyway like.

Karl: Don't like girly girls who like Barbie and ballet.

Ben: I know, and they all like giggle, they all giggle like, 'hee, hee, hee', when they giggle.

MJK: So a girl who is your type, what would she be like?

Ben: She'd be like interested in football.

Karl: Yeah, tomboy.

Ben: Like, interested in computer games.

Karl: Rich

Ben: Rich

MJK: Would you like her to, to look a special way, you know?

Ben: Uh, better than any of the girls in this class cause they all

Karl: Not big [legs] like

Ben: I don't like fat girls like that.

Karl: Look at Christine man.

Ben: I don't like [smarty-art]y ones though.

Karl: I like scruffy ones.

Ben: I don't like boffinators [that is, academically-accomplished or studious].

Karl: And I don't like the ones with boobs and skirts

Ben: Very clever I must say.

Karl: I don't like really dumb ones as well.

Ben: Yeah.

The least common form of friendship we found in the *Children's Relationship Cultures* project was that of a cross-gender grouping. Here, too, the friendships were formed through discourses of heterosexuality.<sup>6</sup> In this case, the anchors of the large friendship group of children who played on an almost daily basis were Morgan<sup>7</sup> and Michael. These two young children had a girlfriend-boyfriend relationship that was constructed on lines of more adolescent romantic attachments. Unlike other children, who spoke about 'going out' but did not actually do anything about it, these two spent a good deal of time in each other's company in and out of school and regarded themselves as 'childhood sweethearts'. Even more, Michael used to cry, so the other children told me, if Morgan played with any other boy. The games they played included a number of other girls and boys and generally took the form of imaginative narrative about heterosexual family life, which drew in mother (Morgan), father (Michael) and their friends in the roles of children, cousins, doctors, teachers, and even, on one occasion, a social worker.

As we can see, all these groups of friends deployed discourses of heterosexuality to make and solidify (as well as sometimes break) friendships. Heterosexuality was thus naturalised across all the schools investigated during the *Children's Relationship Cultures* pilot study and main project. Similarly, Bhana (2002) in South Africa, Letts (1999) in the USA, and Davies (1989; 1993) in Australia, show this pattern is not confined to the UK.

#### **Burdens of representation: who 'carries' (hetero)sexuality?**

As can be seen from the above, for younger children sexuality pervades the school. What is notable is the way that particular children often come to 'carry' or represent sexuality for whole classes. Epstein and Johnson (1998) discuss this process at length in relation to certain, usually working class, girls in secondary schools and James Earl Davis, writing about middle school boys in grades 6-8 in US schools, notes that:

It appears that most of the boys at this middle school are not sexually active but are extremely active with their constructions of the masculine and sexual 'other'. The school culture is clearly heterosexual and normative, wherein boys are expected and encouraged to exhibit an interest in girls and resist dispositions and behaviors not associated with boys. Black males carry a heavier burden of sexuality than do their white male peers at the middle school. Along with the constructed image of troublemakers in and out of class, black boys also hold a special sexualized space at the school. . . . As Michael, an eighth-grade black male states: 'Right now black guys are very popular. It seems like white guys have lost their status, they are more invisible. I think a lot of white girls buy into the myth about black boys'. (Davis 1999: 52)

It is not only black boys who 'carry' the sexuality for classes, whole year levels, or even schools; rather, it is any student constructed as sexually confident. For example, the extracts in the previous section show that Morgan and Michael did this for their whole year group. Indeed, Morgan, in particular, represented the acme of feminine desirability for both boys and girls in her class. Because she was confidently engaged in her romance with Michael, others (girls in particular) were relieved of the need to produce themselves as currently (hetero)sexually interesting, even though, at the same time, they might envy Morgan her attractiveness. Thus, other girls in the year group would, at one and the same time, talk about fancying boys or having boyfriends, and distance themselves from such activities. For example, Nadine and Sally had the following conversation with me:

Nadine: Yes, I like him . . .

DE: And what do you like about him?

Nadine: He's funny and he always makes you laugh. He's not very handsome, but that doesn't really bother me because he's very nice inside.

Sally: There's Anne in our class fancies Sunil and this boy in our class, they said to him, if you had to have a girlfriend who would it be, and he said either me or Nadine...

Nadine: But it's like a love triangle in our school, Sally fancies Ben, Ben fancies Anne, Anne fancies Sunil, Sunil fancies me, and then Sally as well. But I don't fancy anyone in the class...

DE: You know, if there was a boy that you fancied and he fancied you, then what would happen then, do you know?

Nadine: We'd just talk about it, sort of thing, we wouldn't really do anything.

Sally: I think we are a bit too young now, because you have to wait for a while, try it and see. If you like it, wait. If he says would you go out with me, I wouldn't exactly say yes straight away. You would have to think about it and think why you would like him and what are the possibilities.

Nadine: I wouldn't go out with him straight away... because you are still young to go out. You can see them in school and everything, but it's a bit young.

Sally: I don't like kissing.

Nadine: No kissing.

DE: You don't like that?

Nadine: It's not that we don't like it. It's just, I really think that we are too young and that we should have a bit more experience before we go.

Similarly, Julie and Gemma told me that they were too young, but at the same time they were unfazed by Morgan being involved in a relationship with Michael:

DE: Who are the popular kids in your class?

Gemma: I think Morgan

Julie: Yeah, Morgan.

Gemma: Morgan, it's Morgan, yeah...

Julie: Because all the girls [want to] walk round with her and the boys fancy her too. I think her face is pretty, and her clothes she wears as well...

DE: So, you told me that Morgan was the most popular girl

Julie: Yes

DE: And she's also the only one who's got a real boyfriend?

Gemma: Yeah. Because Michael and Morgan always hug each other in the playground.

DE: And you haven't?

Gemma: No.

DE: Would you like to have?

Gemma: Only when I'm much older.

Julie: No, when I'm about eleven

Gemma: And when I'm about, er

Julie: Or twelve

Gemma: When I'm about thirteen.

DE: Right

Julie: I would like a boyfriend, but not at a young age.

Gemma: No, I would like, say, I was about, um, fourteen, say.

These (and many other) conversations I had with other children about Morgan showed again and again that she was regarded both as the most popular girl and the most attractive to girls and boys. She was regarded with a complex combination of respect, attraction and envy, even, at times dislike. But she served a function in the

class and, indeed the year group. So long as she had a boyfriend, others could put it off to a 'more suitable' age. They could explore relationships through hers with Michael, and equally the other boys could vicariously shadow Michael's relationship with Morgan, acutely aware of the status accorded his heterosexual prowess.

### Conclusion

As all the studies of primary schooling and sexuality (and, indeed, those of gender and primary education) show, heterosexuality in one form or another is the pervasive imagined future for children. Bronwyn Davies' (1993) study of state and privately funded primary schools in Australia shows clearly how different versions of femininity and masculinity are available to children in different class, cultural and ethnic positions. She demonstrates that each version has its reference (implicit or explicit) to the expectation of a heterosexual future (and sometimes present). These expectations are routinely confirmed by teachers, even well-meaning ones whose intentions are not heterosexist (Caspar *et al.* 1996).

Primary schools have a characteristically 'cosy', even familial ethos (Burgess and Carter 1996). What this means is that even out queer teachers are read as heterosexual. For example, I tell the story of how a gay teacher came out to his class:

The children's immediate reaction was to deny this because, as Elias said, 'Everyone says you're not gay, because your girlfriend is Ms Allen'. Mr Stuart responded by saying that he was gay and loved and lived with another man, that the children had seen his partner at school concerts and that, currently, he was feeling quite lonely because his partner was working abroad for a long period. At this one of the children said, in a puzzled tone, 'But we saw you and Ms Allen and you were in the greengrocers, laughing'. (Epstein and Johnson 1998: 140)

It is hardly surprising, then, that queer teachers find it particularly difficult to find a place or to conform to expectations in primary schools (Caspar *et al.* 1996; Khayyat 1992; King 1997). Indeed, as this example shows, being queer is no guarantee of avoiding the normalization of heterosexuality!

We argue throughout this book that sexualities cannot be seen on their own, separated from other social differences. The celebration of diversity may be an admirable aim, but this should not blind us to the fact that diversity is not just about difference. Difference is also about power, and the ways that sexualities are read, experienced and produced takes place within contexts that are structured through power and resistance in complicated patterns of inequality. Thus, children are produced (and produce themselves) through a range of identities and social positionings. The hyper-sexualized image of the black (African-American, African-Caribbean) male, for example, can work simultaneously to provide young black boys with the power of heterosexual desirability and to position them as dangerous, troublesome, undesirable and, in school contexts, 'under-achieving'. Similarly, Morgan's heterosexual attractiveness makes her an object of both desire and envy.

These are points to which we will return throughout the book. As we have shown, sexuality is often subsumed within a kind of heterosexual familialism in the primary phase. This pervasive heterosexual familialism frames sex and relationship education in primary school contexts. It is to this that we turn in the next chapter.

### Notes

1. Unlike geographically larger countries, the UK has a large number of national daily papers. The tabloids tend to be more sensational and read by much larger numbers than the more 'highbrow' broadsheets. Right wing tabloids include the *Sun* (owned by Rupert Murdoch), with the largest readership of any national daily) and the *Daily Mail* (which has traditionally been closely associated with the Right of the Conservative Party). Right wing broadsheets include *The Times* (also a Murdoch paper) and the *Telegraph*.
2. Bhana's research took place in four schools: a formerly white school in a wealthy suburb; a formerly Indian school in a low to middle income suburb; a black, working class, township school; and an impoverished black, rural school.
3. The research project drawn on here, *Children's Relationship Cultures in Years 5 and 6* was a 24 month ethnographic study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, Award No. R000 23 7438. The research team were: Debbie Epstein, Mary Kehily, Martin Mac an Chail and Peter Redman.
4. Relevant qualitative and ethnographic studies in elementary/primary schools include Ali, S. (2000), Connolly (1995; 1998), Davies (1993), Epstein (1995; 1997), Kehily *et al.* (2002), Redman (1996; 2002), Renold (1999; 2000), Thorne (1993), Walkerline (1997).
5. Fuller accounts of this research can be found elsewhere in Epstein *et al.* (2001a), Kehily *et al.* (2002), Redman *et al.* (2002).

6. See Epstein *et al.* (2001a) for a full discussion of this friendship.
7. A pseudonym chosen by the girl herself, after Morgaine of the Fairies, King Arthur's mythically 'evil' sister in mainstream versions, of heroine defending mother religions in feminist versions. Morgan's mother was, she told me, a feminist.

### CHAPTER THREE

## 'I've no idea how to do it': Sex education and teachers' fears

Summer term 1999: Week 2, Monday

I arrived at school this morning, prepared to observe the first in the series of sex education lessons in Year 5. At the end of last term, Katherine had confirmed to me that they would be spending an intensive week on sex education this week, and that she was happy to have me come in for it. As soon as I arrived, Katherine looked embarrassed and a bit panicky. Then she apologised profusely. She had forgotten I was coming in. She should have let me know. They [the Year 5 teachers] hadn't been able to compose their letter home to parents yet, and wouldn't be starting sex education this week. Instead, they would be doing it after half term. Katherine was anxious, she told me later that day, about doing sex education at all. The letter hadn't gone out to parents asking for permission, because she and Liz, the other Year 5 teacher, couldn't work out how to phrase it best. (Debbie Epstein, Research Diary)

### Doing sexuality education

This chapter examines how two teachers in a London primary school set about teaching sex education to their Year 5 classes. I use the case study to explore a number of different issues in sexuality education. The chapter begins by demonstrating the extreme anxiety felt by teachers, as illustrated in the quote above, particularly in the context of primary schooling. I then turn to the exclusions from sex and relationship education that arise largely as a result of teacher anxiety and argue that this makes the sex education curriculum and class primarily a site for struggle over sexual meanings and the social control and policing of them. I

explore the discursive framings available to teachers for sex and relationship education in schools. In this context, I examine the UK government's *Guidance on Sex and Relationship Education* (DfEE 2000), pointing to some of the contradictions and tensions involved in a proposed curriculum that simultaneously seeks to: promote marriage; encourage stable relationships; discourage homophobic bullying; and avoid the stigmatisation of non-standard families. Given the key aims of the government to reduce teenage pregnancy and promote sexual health, the main framing of the policy is one of health and morality. We suggest, that, given this framework, sex and relationship education is likely to be constrained, narrow and ineffective.

The events described in the short extract at the head of this chapter took place during the *Children's Relationship Cultures in Years 5 and 6 Research Project*. They are symptomatic of the anxiety experienced by primary school teachers tasked with delivering sex and relationship education. The processes involved in formal sex and relationship education formed only a small part of the focus of the project, which was primarily directed at children's informal cultures. However, the project team was interested in investigating how it was conducted in the schools that we researched and how the children responded to it.

#### 'I've no idea how to do it'

The episode described at the beginning of this chapter was only the first in a series of postponements that Katherine and Liz, the two Year 5 teachers at Bellevue, engaged in. Katherine, with three or four years of teaching behind her, was in London from New Zealand for a year or two, and Liz was a newly qualified teacher (NQT) in her first year of teaching. Although they were successful teachers in other aspects of the curriculum, they appeared terrified of having to do sex and relationship education. These lessons were put off so often that it became a standing joke between the two teachers and me. Indeed, it was only in the penultimate week of the summer term that the lessons finally took place, reduced in number from the planned five sessions to three, with the annual sports day held in between sessions two and three.

By the summer term in which the sex and relationship education programme was to take place, I had been coming into the school on a regular basis for nearly a year. I had spent most of my time in Katherine's class and in the playground and had interviewed all her pupils at least once, either in groups or individually. So by the summer term, I knew Katherine's class well, and Liz's pupils were also accustomed to me. Realising how tense Katherine and Liz were about the prospect of sex and relationship education, I had ensured that they had received a package of materials and lesson guidelines from Sex Education Forum.<sup>1</sup> The week before the lessons took place Liz attended a two hour, after school in-service training session on Personal, Social and Health Education put on by the Local Education Authority. In addition, I had several discussions with the two teachers about how they might go about sexuality education with Year 5 pupils. In the course of these discussions, I had made some practical suggestions including the well-tried idea of asking children to write questions anonymously and place them in a box during the two weeks before the lessons so that the programme could be planned around the children's own needs. None of these strategies was enough to assuage the panic felt by the teachers and the suggestions made in the materials from Sex Education Forum remained untouched, as did my proposals about allowing children the opportunity to ask questions in advance. Clearly, both Katherine and Liz felt that permitting this would mean relinquishing too much control over the sex and relationship education curriculum and they felt they could not afford to do this. The day before the first session was finally held, Katherine said to me that she was very nervous, had 'no idea how to do it' and hoped that I would help her out if she got stuck.

The pedagogic strategy adopted by Katherine and Liz was one that felt safe to them: a BBC sex education film was shown in two parts on two successive days. After the film was shown, the children remained sitting on the carpet to hold classroom discussions with the teachers. The first lesson was concerned primarily with the different biologies of men and women and the mechanics of procreation, although elements of love and emotion were mentioned. The second session followed the woman in the film through

pregnancy and childbirth. The third session, which consisted entirely of the whole class, sitting on the carpet together in a question, answer and discussion session with the teacher, was an attempt to open up the subject for more wide-ranging discussion. In the context of the whole class lesson, children were encouraged to ask and respond to questions, but there was no time given for quieter, more reflective discussion in small groups. The video used in the lessons was not the BBC's most up-to-date programme in the area of sex education, but had been made some ten years previously, as the clothes worn by the family in the film revealed. The children's first reaction to the film, shown at the beginning of the first lesson, was to comment adversely on the old-fashioned clothes.

Part of the teachers' nervousness was about what might happen if they 'said the wrong thing' and parents reacted adversely. In this context, government regulations, which insist that parents be informed in advance of the content of sex education lessons, increased their anxiety. Their delay in sending out the letters was precisely because they were concerned about how to explain what they were doing. They arranged a time at which parents could view the BBC film in advance, but only one mother took advantage of this possibility. This parent kept her child out of school on the 'sex education days' because she did not wish her to receive explicit sexual information, while others gave their permission without any further question. In a context in which teachers are very aware of the potential for significant public outcry at the conduct of sex and relationship education, as they are in the UK at least (see Epstein and Johnson 1998), a cautious approach is understandable, even required. The fact that education about sexuality, and only about sexuality, is the subject of a requirement to defer to parental wishes is pointed evidence of the sensitivity of the issues involved. It also, almost inevitably, leads to very conservative and heterosexist approaches, since the majority of parents are heterosexual and assumed by teachers and school governors to be heterosexist, even bigoted, as well. Anxiety is thus the order of the day. Indeed, Katherine's and Liz's trepidation illustrated clearly the point made to Lynda Measor and her colleagues by a trainer working in the area of sex education:

Schools are positive but frightened. The threat of being taken to court or even being thoroughly disapproved of is closing them down, they won't even talk about contraception for example. Teachers feel they are putting themselves at risk. (Measor *et al.* 2000: 25)

The series of lessons began, as the government advises in the *Sex and Relationship Education Guidance* (DfEE 2000), with a brainstorm about words that were allowable and those that were not in the context of the lessons. As Katherine said to the children, the point of this activity was to ensure that they would all be 'sensible', avoid rude words and refrain from giggling and other 'silliness'. Those in the first category (that is, 'sensible' words) included biological names of body parts: vagina, penis, womb, and so on. Those in the second included the whole range of colloquial terms such as 'cunt', 'fuck', 'wank' and, significantly, 'lesbian', 'lezzie', 'bumboy', 'pooter' and 'gay'. Katherine wrote all these words up, in their separate categories, on a piece of flip chart paper, without questioning the inclusion of 'lesbian' and 'gay' in the section showing unacceptable 'rude' language. The astonishing failure to challenge the inclusion of these terms in the category of unacceptable words confirmed their usefulness as terms of abuse in the playground. Katherine's inaction seemed to derive in part from the fear about being accused of 'promoting homosexuality', in the words of Section 28, and in part from her own lack of awareness about issues to do with homosexuality. The lists of words were kept up in the classroom throughout the three lessons and served to frame and police all the discussions. Thus, the restriction of terminology to the biological sanitized sex education at the same time as medicalizing sex and sexuality, while banning 'lesbian' and 'gay' because they were seen as 'rude' further reinscribed heterosexuality as presumably normal and morally desirable. People who used 'rude words', and also lesbians and gays, were implicitly positioned as being wrong, undesirable, nasty and immature.

**Anxious inclusions:** 'we've got no more videos, obviously', Katherine and Liz decided that they wished to open up their sex and relationship education programme to more than procreation. They were concerned to allow for discussion about relationships and

emotion in the context of sex education. This was to be the stuff of the third in the series of lessons. Katherine's third lesson began thus:

Okay, right, we've got no more videos, obviously. Okay. But what I found yesterday, and I talked to [Liz] about it, was the fact that because time went on and you had so many questions, okay, I let you ask and answer all the questions, but it's sort of, like, 'Well, that's sex education gone. See you. Bye. Have a nice life.' Okay. So what I wanted to do today is, there are just some aspects that we both decided that we'd quite like to talk about and discuss, and, hopefully, that you'd ask some more questions, and just talk about different things. Okay?

So, what I want you to do first of all, is just remember back to the video. Okay. Where there was a cartoon picture of two people having sexual intercourse. A female and a male having sexual intercourse. Okay? And I want you to think, or give us some reason why, or what, what made, what do you think made those two want to have sexual intercourse together? And not, say, with somebody else?

This opening gambit is redolent of the anxiety that Katherine felt in opening up the discussion beyond the safety of the biological. The repeated use of okay, when her whole demeanour and the number of repetitions of the word, indicated clearly that it was far from okay, communicated to the children that they needed to reassure her. Thus, the immediate response to her statement was for them to cast about for a word that she could cotton on to and use without displaying anxiety. They come up with a number of words and phrases within a liberal discourse of sexuality that could comfortably be used within the context of the classroom and following Katherine's question:

- 'they loved each other'
- 'they've been together a long time'
- 'they wanted to make a commitment to each other'
- 'they wanted to show each other how much they love them'
- 'they just loved each other so much that they just wanted to have a baby'

- 'maybe they were husband and wife'
- 'maybe they were sexually attracted to each other'

Katherine greeted all these comments with praise such as 'good word', 'brilliant word' and 'good boy'. However, when a child offered 'maybe because it's fun', she completely ignored the comment. Towards the end of this part of the lesson, some of the children moved into suggestions that she found completely unacceptable:

Mike: They both got drunk the other night.

Katherine: That's not a good issue, Jimmy?

Jimmy: Maybe it was love at first sight.

Katherine: Mm, are you going to write Mills and Boons books? Love at first sight!

Peter: What if the woman just liked the man's legs?

Katherine: Liked his hairy legs? ... Solomon.

Solomon: Maybe they've never had it before and they just wanted to try it out!

Katherine: Right, a couple more.

Cherry: The man might just, a bit like what Peter said, but the man might just like the women's, erm ...

Peter: Breasts.

Alex: Bottocks.

Katherine: Bottocks? Bottocks? Bottocks?

Peter: He might like her

Sam: Or her breasts.

Katherine: [writing on the board] Right. Well, we'll put 'physical appearance', yeah.

What can we tell from these interchanges about what kind of thinking was allowable within the context of the lesson? First, it is clear

that impulsive or 'irresponsible' sex was not to be condoned. Katherine disapproves of sex when drunk and also steers the children away from the romantic discourse of love at first sight with her rather sarcastic comments about Mills and Boon. The underlying but unspoken issue here is the danger of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases from unprotected, possibly drunken and unplanned sex. Second, the implied fetishizing of body parts (buttocks and breasts) is entirely disallowed. The children's construction of particular parts of women's and men's bodies as sexually titillating is quickly reordered into a liberal discourse of 'physical appearance'.

At this point, and notwithstanding the children's best efforts, it becomes clear that they still have not come up with the answer to the question 'what's in teacher's mind?' – or rather, they came up with some of the 'right' answers too quickly, before Katherine had a chance to go through all the disallowed ones. Indeed, it seems that she needs the children to rehearse the 'wrong' answers in order to be able to set the 'appropriate' boundaries to their thinking and attitudes about sex. So she asks them to think again, saying:

There's one thing you haven't given me, that, I mean, I guess it comes under all these things like commitment and trust and love.

The children try to guess again, coming up with 'friendship', 'love', 'friendship', 'family', 'adulthood', 'adulthood', 'parenthood', 'teenager' to which Katherine replies, 'Before that'. Finally, one of the children guesses correctly, saying, 'A relationship'. 'Thank you' says Katherine, and this is followed by a round of applause for the winner of what feels, by this time, like a competition.

### Power, possibility and protocol

Having established a clear set of boundaries, the field is then open for a discussion about the rights and wrongs of beginning and conducting heterosexual relationships. Katherine sets this up immediately the applause has died down by saying:

Katherine: You get into a relationship. Now, who can tell me what is involved there, in a relationship – big word. We have to make a c-c-c-commitment. Sally?

Sally: Well ...

Katherine: Just for something to do?

Sally: Erm, if you're in, if you have a relationship with a boy then you kiss and stuff.

Katherine: Good girl! Right. Okay. That's almost where you still have friendships, but it goes through. Like you can be friends with a boy all your life, but as soon as something more happens, like you start to kiss, or end up having sexual intercourse, or you start doing a lot more of these things, you decide you fancy him more than friend, you become involved in a relationship. Yeah? Hands up if you have been in, you've gone around with, or whatever you say over here, a person of the opposite sex. Like guys have gone out with a girl, or boys, you've gone out with a girl, you've either had a girlfriend or a boyfriend? Fine, yeah, what was it like?

Here we see two processes at work. First, Katherine establishes very clear guidelines about the presumption of heterosexuality. There is no possibility, within her discourse, of guys going out with guys or girls with girls. Second, her address is almost entirely to the boys, with the girls included only in the final phrase – 'you've either had a girlfriend or a boyfriend'. In this respect, she is responding to Government guidance which demands that sex education be directed much more at boys than has historically been the case (DHEE 2000: para. 1.22). Third, she differentiates between friendship and relationship, with friendship having the lesser value of the two. This sets up heterosexual relationships as not including close friendship, but as something different from that, in which, as Nancy Chodorow (1989) suggests, women will need close, intimate friendships with other women in addition to sexual and emotional relationships with men. Furthermore, because her address is to the boys in the class, it removes from the boys the responsibility for (and the pleasures of) being friends with girls. Finally, she sets herself up as the expert on the children's futures in a way that discourages them from drawing on current friendships in order to imagine future

relationships. Thus the children move immediately into a discourse of ages and stages, with a strong developmental tendency within a wholly heterosexual matrix.

In this section of the lesson, the conversation is moved into a discussion of sex roles. The question is raised as to who may ask whom out. This is set up when Katherine asks one of the boys, Tim, how he asked his 'girlfriend' out:

Katherine: Did you get someone to go over there and say 'Tim, erm, Jemima's asked Sammy to tell, erm, Carole that, erm, that Tim is in, erm, that Carole wants to go round with you'. Or did you just go straight up and ask her out?

Tim: I can't remember.

Jemima: That's what boys are supposed to do.

The conversation about whether girls should be able to ask boys out and *vice versa* continues for some time (over two pages of transcript) until Francesca says, in an exasperated tone, with her hands on her hips:

Well, because boys have to do something in a relationship, because girls have the periods, they have the most pain in sexual intercourse, and they have the babies.

At one level, Francesca's very definite statement appears to be proto-feminist: boys have to do *something* in a relationship. She brings in a kind of gender critique, albeit one that is biologically based. However, this version of feminism not only assumes that girls have to put up with pain and trouble, but also that their proper place is within fairly conventional heterosexual ways of relating. Although it seems as if Francesca is trying to bring an end to this conversation, it continues for another two pages of transcript, when one of the boys raises the question of wet dreams as being as problematic for boys as Francesca's list of problems is for girls. At this point, Francesca's great friend Morgan says:

Morgan: I think the boys should ask the girls out, because, erm, I mean, I'm answering, all the boys have to do is put

their sheets and pyjamas in the washing machine, and they don't have the risk of, when they're, when the girls are having their baby, they don't have the risk, the boys don't have the risk of dying, or getting stretch marks, or miscarriage, or abortion.

Katherine: Carole?

Carole: Erm, Katherine, I think boys should ask girls out because, I mean, at the end of the day, if we're going to the disco, I mean, half our time [is putting] make up on, for the boys really, trying to attract them.

At one level, this exchange looks as if Carole is changing the subject with a move into questions of heterosexual attractiveness. At another level, however, this is still about the work that women have to do in order to maintain and sustain heterosexuality as an institution. The gendered analysis of these ten year old girls may not be sophisticated or complete, but it is definitely present in what they say and in their impatience with the way the lesson has been set up.

In addition to the children's gender critique, they are also able to pick up and run with a materialist analysis after one of the children said that at their age 'you don't really go anywhere with them, you just like say you do'. I asked whether this was about not having the money and the children responded by detailing the large number of ways in which they were disempowered from being able to 'go out' with each other. As Tim said, 'You don't have a choice, really'. What happens in this conversation is that these young children are able to recount financial and other forms of parental control over their sexuality, broadly conceived. As Alex says, talking about being older:

Alex: Well, you'll get to do what you want. You won't have your mum to boss you about, saying, 'Oh, you have to be in by ten o'clock, no later'. And they won't bother you, and you won't have to get what clothes they give you or that, you can – I'm not saying that I will – but you can smoke, you can have a baby, you can do whatever you like, you can go out clubbing...

Joe: ... because you have to be eighteen ...

Alex: You have the money, you have the money to go to the pictures

Joe: Like, when you're older, your relationships are more, erm, serious,

DE: Can you say a bit more about what that means?

Alex: Like, erm, a bit like what Francesca said when she said, erm, like you, erm, and you can ...

Francesca: You have the power and the money

Alex: Yeah, and stuff to take them properly out.

As we can see from these exchanges, the children have a strong sense of who they are and the possibilities open to them within the heterosexual economies of schooling (Hey 1997) and family now and in the future. Not only can they talk, with the girls taking the lead, about questions of gender, they can also discuss, in some depth, the limitations on their power as children and, in particular, as children without direct access to money. Hence Francesca's comment 'you have the power and the money' to indicate the increasing power that comes with age and with paid work and Alex's heartfelt recital of the things that parents can and do stop you from doing. This is not to suggest that parents are wrong to restrict their children's ability to go out late at night and so on, but to point out that children themselves have a developed analysis of their position in the world.

It is also true that children of this age generally have different physical capacities from those they will have as adolescents and adults (at least until they reach old age). For example, most of the girls have not yet started to menstruate and would not be capable of conceiving. However, as Bob Connell (1995: 62–65) points, we can only understand our bodily experiences and capacities through culturally constructed means. So the children's explanations of their present and future bodily experiences and fantasies are given meaning through their understandings of what bodies and sexualities mean in their own micro-cultures and in the wider culture in which they live.

#### Anxious exclusions: 'You're going to get scared about different things'

At this point in the lesson, with most of it gone, the teacher wants to move on to a protectionist discourse, as advised by Government (DFEE 2000), in which she can warn children of the dangers of sex and advise them to be careful and delay having sexual relationships. She opens this phase of the lesson by specifically asking the children:

Right, now, I just want you, now I want you to imagine you're ... fifteen, okay? Now, what would you be scared of, or afraid of, or a bit dubious about?

At this point the children offer a number of 'right' answers, talking about the chance that they might misjudge someone's character and end up going out with 'someone horrible', that they might be gossiped about or lose their friends because of a problematic relationship, and that they might end up having under age sex, possibly by being told lies about their boyfriend's or girlfriend's real age. They draw heavily on popular culture, here, and in particular on the then current storyline of the popular soap, *EastEnders*, in which it had recently been revealed that Bianca had had sex with her mother's boyfriend, Dan, when she was fifteen. The children and teacher alike blame Bianca for this situation, on the grounds that she was lying about her age. Nothing is said, at this point, to indicate that Dan could be considered as having sexually abused her.

Discussion of children's fears continued unchecked for a while, with Katherine apparently becoming uncomfortable when one of the girls raises the issues of rape and domestic violence:

Cherry: Erm, yeah, rape you, or they force you to do something that you didn't want to do or something. And there's another, I want to say, it's if I would be scared about, I bet that most, not most men, but some men in this world, most of them would be like, this wife has been through about three husbands and then she finally found someone, and then they're okay, like, for a couple of months, and then it starts to go wrong, like, he starts hitting her and hitting her children

and, like, being really horrible, like punching them, throwing them, hitting with anything in the hand, or something like that. I would be something like that as well . . .

Yeah, and like, and then, they'd run away and the police would never get them, and then, and then, you're thinking there are always going to be this woman, somewhere in this thing, that thinks this man is really nice, realise that he is a really horrible man that beats women and children.

Katherine: Okay, last one!

This is particularly poignant because Cherry, a recent entrant to the school, was, in fact, in care and living in a children's home. While I did not know the detail of why she had been taken into care, her impassioned speech indicated the nature of her family problems. Katherine's dismissive answer is in line with the Government's Guidelines, which suggest that if the lesson becomes 'too adult', the teacher should move the subject on and an appropriate member of staff should deal with the issue in a one-to-one pastoral session with the particular child (DfEE 2000: para. 4.5). At one level, this is entirely appropriate. An individual child's experience should not be exposed and it may well be that the child needs individual support. At the level of the education of the class, however, a dismissive response is wholly inadequate since it leaves the children without the wherewithal to understand a contribution like Cherry's, and makes it more likely that other children will deliberately 'closet' bad heterosexual experiences. Such a strategy is linked to, and feeds into, the discourse of childhood innocence discussed in the previous chapter. The teacher is certainly in a difficult position here, but guidance on how to shift the discussion from the individual child to the general issues would be more helpful than guidance that leads to the silencing of abusive relationships. Similarly, as Sarah points out in chapter five, refugee teenagers with experiences of war must represent their experiences as happy and monogamously heterosexual.

Katherine moves immediately into a long set-piece speech in which

she summarises all that she wishes the children to get out of the sex education classes:

Okay, what I want to say is, you gave me all these things about getting into a relationship and why, why, say, people got into a relationship or why people end up having sexual intercourse and stuff like that. And, erm, I mean, because I care about you all, I just want to make sure that you know the benefits of getting into a relationship. And there's an up side and there can be a down side, alright? And even though you're only at your age, some of you are starting to have relationships with boys and girls, whatever, okay? And as you're going to get older, it's going to get more and more complex. It's going to get more serious, like some people of you said. You're going to get scared about different things. You're not going to know what's lying ahead. And you've watched the video. You've two sessions of the video, okay? . . .

There is no, there has been no lies and there's been no dishonesty. Okay, I know it's been, and it's made us feel very comfortable and very good, and I hope that you have actually taken in what we've said, and what you've seen. . . . It's fantastic, and it can be fantastic, and you can have a very happy baby, and healthy baby, and it can bring lots of joys, okay. But I just want you to be extra careful thinking about the other side of it as well, alright?

Coming as it does, hard on the heels of Cherry's account of rape and domestic violence, and her explicit anxiety about a violent man being 'out there' and able to deceive yet another woman (with children) into believing he is 'nice', this speech is little short of shocking. The way in which Katherine insists that everyone is very comfortable appears disingenuous. However, she is caught up in a discursive framework, promoted by the Government that insists on happy heterosexual family as the norm towards which sex and relationship education must be directed. The promotion of 'marriage and family life' as the key element of both the guidance on sex education provided in the previous Department for Education's Circular 5/94<sup>2</sup> and the more recent *Guidance on Sex and Relationship Education* (DfEE 2000) is not sustainable without the kind of move made by Katherine here. Her 'lie' (that there have been no lies and that everyone is feeling comfortable) is virtually unavoidable once she is sticking to official guidelines.

Katherine's next move, also prescribed by Government Guidance is to warn the children of the dangers of sex, particularly when indulged in by those under the age of consent:

I just want you to remember that it's not going to be long before you are teenagers, which is about twelve, thirteen, whatever, okay? And there's a lot of things out there that are really scaring teenagers at the moment, and scaring parents, okay? You have been taught about safety, or using condoms and pills and all that sort of stuff. . . . And, as I say, there are children out there who are having children at your age, and they are just, they are kids having kids, and it's very frightening. Because there's no way on the face of this earth that any of you could bring up a child at your age, or even at eleven, twelve, thirteen, okay? So I guess what I want to say is that you are well aware of what's going to happen in a relationship, yeah? You know that you don't have to do anything you don't want to do, okay? No matter what. And out there is society, there is drugs and there is alcohol, and all those sorts of things, and you really have to watch yourself. You need to really think hard about relationships you're getting into now. Alright? But just remember, it's not all fun and games, alright? It can be very scary. It can be very dangerous. And it can be very life threatening to your health. Okay, if you are silly, and don't play your cards right.

The problem with this part of Katherine's set piece is that at least one of the children in the class (and in practically any class) has experience of having no choice, and of sexual abuse. Her statement that 'you don't have to do anything you don't want to do' is problematic in the extreme. This takes us back to the discussion in chapter two about notions of childhood innocence and how they endanger children by rendering the abused and therefore sexually experienced child 'knowing' and, like Bianca, 'guilty'. At this point of the lesson, the anxiety felt by the teachers at the start of the sex and relationship education programme has been transferred, lock, stock and barrel, to the children and, in particular, to those children who have experienced sex. We can see this in Cherry's response to Katherine's summing up and invitation (which is not intended to be taken up) to the children to ask any further questions. At this point, the children make several attempts to explore just what is life-threatening about sex. They ask about AIDS, and about unpro-

rected sex and about sex before puberty. In a question that haunts this last part of the lesson, one of the girls asks 'can you die from it if you're not forced into having sex?' Here, the underlying concern is the anxiety felt by many young children who have been sexually abused (and by adult survivors of abuse) that they have been complicit in their own abuse – and, indeed, this has been confirmed to them in the discussion about Bianca's guilt in her 'affair' with Dan. The child's final attempt to gain reassurance comes with the question:

Katherine, if you're about twelve or thirteen, and you haven't had your period, and you had sexual intercourse, could you die from not having your period and having sex?

Katherine's answer to this is that 'the only way sex is going to kill you is if you have unprotected sex far too many times. . . . ? The implication here is that becoming infected with HIV is the fault of the promiscuous person (by implication, woman) who should have taken more responsibility for herself and the behaviour of her (male) partners. The lesson is then swiftly brought to an end as Katherine tells the children to 'please do your duties [of tidying the classroom at the end of the day]' and the children's anxiety is left hanging and unresolved.

#### **Conclusion: implications for policy and practice**

After the sex and relationship education programme was over, I interviewed both teachers about how they felt it had gone. In contrast to the extreme anxiety they expressed before the lesson, they now felt happy, contented and comfortable with the lessons they had conducted. While I did not watch Liz's lessons, which were on at the same time as Katherine's, it was clear from the interview that they had followed a very similar course. This meant that both teachers could relax in the knowledge that they had achieved the prescribed sex and relationship education programme for Year Five children without endangering themselves by being too frank and open, or 'promoting homosexuality' or problematising heterosexuality. The overall effect, of producing anxiety amongst many of the children was simply invisible to them.

The close examination given in this chapter to one lesson that closely followed the preferred Government pedagogy and curriculum in this area demonstrates the poverty of such an approach. The discursive framing of sex as heterosexual, preferably monogamous and married, and dangerous only to those who behave badly (promiscuously or carelessly) gave no opportunity for any kind of real learning to take place. The analysis shows clearly that the children learnt almost nothing that they did not already know. Neither were they enabled to reflect more broadly on sexual relationships. Even when they tried (with partial success) to take the conversation into the realm of such reflection, by discussion of power imbalances, Katherine did not allow that analysis to develop and could in fact not do so without falling foul of the *Guidance*. The critique made of this lesson should not detract from the fact that Katherine and Liz were, in other areas, very successful teachers. In their approach to sex and relationship education, they were doing the best they could, working closely within the constraints of Government guidance and cognisant of the likelihood that any departure from that guidance would be met with a punitive response. The problem was not that they were incompetent or illiberal or malicious teachers, but that the prescribed approach is pedagogically bankrupt and incapable of offering children the kind of sexuality education from which they might learn and on which they might be able to reflect and build their own ways of understanding.

### Notes

1. Sex Education Forum is the leading Non-Governmental Organisation in the UK that is concerned with developing policy and practice in sex education. It is funded by the Department for Education and Skills and the Department of Health and brings together over 50 charities and other organisations with a national brief for developing sex education. Materials can be obtained from Sex Education Forum via the National Children's Bureau website (<http://www.ncb.org.uk>) or by writing to Sex Education Forum at the National Children's Bureau, 8 Wakley Street, London.
2. Issued by the previous Conservative Government under John Major.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### From the Outside, Looking in: Doing sexuality in secondary school

... educators have yet to take seriously the centrality of sexuality in the making of a life and in the having of ideas. (Britzman 1998: 70)

#### Introduction

In this chapter I review some of the research literature around sexuality education as it is experienced by young people between the ages of eleven and sixteen in secondary or high school. In some respects this research documents a depressing litany of failure over the past fifteen years by educators and government educational policy makers alike, to address the needs of young people around their sexual identities and practices. Britzman's words seem to be frustratingly true. Many young people prefer to rely on teen magazines, adult pornography magazines, television and their friends to provide them with more useful information and support about sexuality than they receive in school. As suggested in chapter one, this is partly because sex and relationship education is always about what a particular government chooses to permit the school to say officially about sexuality and what or whom must remain silent. Chapter three details how the sexual experiences and identities of abused children are silenced through close adherence to the UK government's guidance on sex and relationship education. Equally, as will be seen in chapter five, girls from non-monogamous families must remain closeted about their family and community customs and practices. Similarly queer pupils (or the children of queer families) are silenced in the context of schooling – and particularly of sex and relationship education. These silenced sexualities belong