British Educational Research Journal
Vol. 35, No. 6, December 2009, pp. 837–855

'*No Outsiders*': moving beyond a discourse of tolerance to challenge heteronormativity in primary schools

Renée DePalma* and Elizabeth Atkinson
University of Sunderland, UK

In this paper we describe a UK-based participatory action research project that looks beyond the discourse of tolerance to investigate and challenge heteronormative processes in primary schools through reflective action research. This 28-month ESRC-funded project supports 15 primary teachers working in schools in three regions of the UK to develop action research projects that address lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender equality in their own schools and classrooms. In this paper we will examine how the original principles on which the project design was based have manifested themselves throughout the course of the project, drawing upon examples of classroom practice and reflective discussions among project team members. We will explore how designing intentionally for collective participation has produced spaces for people to do and think in ways that have not only gone beyond what we imagined but have also challenged and sometimes contradicted our own ways of thinking.

Introduction

This paper focuses on a participatory action research (PAR) project investigating approaches to addressing lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) equality, both within and beyond the curriculum, in primary schools in the UK. Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council,[1] The *No Outsiders* project involves a collaboration between primary teachers in three areas of the UK and university researchers at The University of Sunderland, The University of Exeter and Institute of Education, University of London. The project has a team of over 40 members:[2] 23 teacher-researchers working in 17 sites (14 primary schools, one nursery, one teacher training institution and one Local Authority advisory service); seven university-based researchers across the three collaborating institutions; a diversity trainer (who also has the role of media and liaison officer) and a project administrator.

*Corresponding author. C/o Sylvia Briggs, School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of Sunderland, Forster Building, Chester Road, Sunderland SR1 3SD, UK. Email: renee.depalma@sunderland.ac.uk

ISSN 0141-1926 (print)/ISSN 1469-3518 (online)/09/060837-19

DOI: 10.1080/01411920802688705

Project participants are using a collection of children's books featuring lesbian, gay and non-gender-conforming characters, as well as developing cross-curricular inclusion projects, using art, drama, poetry and music, citizenship work, school policy development and work with school councils.[3] Project teachers are now acting as mentors to other schools and their expertise is in increasingly wide demand at regional and national events, giving the project a multiplicity of representative voices. In this paper, we will examine the original principles on which the project design was based and explore how these principles have manifested themselves throughout the course of the project, drawing upon data generated both through classroom practice and through reflective discussions among project team members. We will explore how designing intentionally for collective participation has produced spaces for people to do and think in ways that have not only gone beyond what we imagined but have also challenged and sometimes contradicted our own ways of thinking.

Homophobia as grounded in heteronormativity

There is a wealth of research documenting the detrimental effects of homophobia and transphobia in the UK (Cull *et al.*, 2006; Whittle *et al.*, 2007) as well as in various international contexts (de Castell & Jenson, 2002; Dyson *et al.*, 2003; McCready, 2004; National Mental Health Association, 2005; Dalley & Campbell, 2006; Lanaspa & Galán, 2006; Moita-Lopes, 2006). In the UK, despite its importance in terms of pupil, teacher and community wellbeing, sexualities equality[4] remains the one area of inclusion still largely unaddressed in schools, although significant starting-points have been established within the field of primary education, for example in the work of Renold (2000) and Epstein *et al.* (2003) in the UK and Letts and Sears (1999) in the USA.

Some research has investigated the processes by which heteronormativity, the 'organizational structures in schools that support heterosexuality as normal and anything else as deviant' (Donelson & Rogers, 2004, p. 128) is maintained and enforced through both active and passive means in the everyday routines of school life (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Epstein *et al.*, 2003; Mac an Ghaill, 1994). A growing body of classroom research (Renold, 2000, 2005; Youdell, 2005, 2006; Nayak & Kehily, 2006) has begun to investigate the ways in which gender and sexuality as bodily performances figure in the complex social processes of schools. This research has drawn upon feminist, post-structuralist and queer theory perspectives to explore and deconstruct what Butler (1999) defines as the heterosexual matrix: the collection of normalising discourses (Fairclough, 1988; Gee, 1996) that maintain and support heteronormativity in all social contexts.

While we describe homophobia here as being grounded in the normalising discourse of heteronormativity (both within and beyond school settings), one of the central tensions in the project relates to the distinction between anti-homophobia and counter-heteronormative work. As we will describe in more detail later, government policy and guidance tends to take an anti-homophobia—and more explicitly, anti-bullying—

stance (Department for Education and Skills, 2002; Department for Education and Skills & Department of Health, 2004; Department for Children Schools and Families, 2007), a discourse we all tend to appropriate when we communicate with government bodies or with the general public through the popular media. As project members, we have also discovered that the stances we take and the discourses we draw upon depend not only on the context and audience but also on our own fundamental understandings of what it means to go 'beyond tolerance' of LGBT people.

Within the project team, we share the conviction that the status quo, where the ever-present threat of bullying and exclusion on the basis of perceived sexuality and non-gender normative behaviours results in silences and invisibility, is unacceptable. This kind of 'don't ask, don't tell' tolerance only serves to perpetuate stereotypes and propagate the heterosexist assumption that all teachers and parents are heterosexual and all girls and boys will grow up and eventually (want to) marry a person of the opposite sex. In this sense, we share the view that primary teachers must go beyond an anti-homophobia discourse of tolerance in the form of quiet acceptance (in other words, simple lack of overt oppression). We share the view, which is not necessarily expressed in all anti-bullying discourses around homophobia, that teachers need to reach beyond passive and disingenuous tolerance of 'those LGBT people' to proactively incorporate discussions of sexuality and gender into their curriculum. We do not, however, agree on how this should be done. Whether tolerant silences and invisibilities can best be disrupted by highlighting lesbian and gay histories and attacking hetero-gender stereotypes or by troubling the binaries implicit in the very categories of lesbian/gay, boy/girl is a question that remains alive and unresolvable in our research.

The *No Outsiders* project

As a critical social research project (Harvey, 1990) the ultimate aim of the *No Outsiders* project 'is essentially to contribute to educational transformation' (Crozier, 2003, p. 82). Drawing upon principles of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1986) we aim not only to explore but also to deconstruct the intersecting lines of power (Foucault, 1979) that maintain social inequities through implicit consensus. As Mac Naughton (2005) points out, 'A consensus that rests on authoritative and officially sanctioned truth always silences alternative truths, marginalises diversity and reduces it to abnormality' (p. 37). It is our intention through this project to disrupt the apparently seamless nature of such consensual silence and to open up the ground for the exploration of this under-recognised area of inequality within primary schools.

The project centres around four key aims:

- to add to the understanding of the operation of heteronormativity within primary school contexts;
- to develop effective means of challenging this heteronormativity;
- to create a community of practice within which teachers can develop effective approaches to addressing sexualities equality within the broader context of inclusive education; and

- to enhance teacher professional development and autonomy through action and critical reflection.

We designed the *No Outsiders* project according to a PAR model. Participatory action research, as a type of action research, is based on the understanding that practice and systematic reflection form a powerful type of research that draws upon practitioner strengths in ways that traditional academic research has failed to recognise:

> It is now widely recognised that practitioners have unique insights into practice which are simply not available to researchers who come in from outside, and that professional knowledge is, therefore, an essential component of understanding any educational practice. (Somekh, 2005, p. 3)

Participatory action research is a particular type of action research that is enriched by the formation of democratic collaborative relationships among practitioners and professional researchers, 'Developing relationships is a key aspect of the research process requiring negotiation and reciprocity. The relationship between the researcher and other participants should be one of co-researchers thereby allowing input not only into results but also into definition of the problem or issue to be researched' (Aimers, 1999). While this democratic relationship among university and school-based researchers may seem Utopian, the constant negotiation of research relationships, problem definitions and approaches is a defining feature of our research community of practice.

Since project schools are located throughout the UK, participants working in different schools have little opportunity for face-to-face communication. To mediate the effects of potential isolation, our project website provides a place where data can be shared and discussions can be opened about a range of issues defined by participants. Drawing upon Lave and Wenger's (1991) insistence that a community of practice thrives on heterogeneity and is based on the assumption 'that members have different interests, make diverse contributions to activity and hold varied viewpoints' (p. 97), we purposefully set out to design a PAR community that acknowledged dissensus, rather than consensus, as the starting-point for action. We chose not to resolve differences through compromise in ways that would inevitably minimise or silence less powerful voices and we have aimed to allow the 'tension inherent in the very dynamics of language and the dynamism demanded of the continuous action and reflection, action and reflection, of genuine praxis' (Winkelmann, 1991, p. 4) to persist. Keeping this heteroglossic dialogue (Bakhtin & Emerson, 1999) alive is a challenging task, as we have discussed elsewhere (DePalma & Teague, 2008).

Earlier phases of the research: developing the principles underpinning the *No Outsiders* project

The design and focus of the project arises from the findings of our earlier research (Atkinson & DePalma, 2008; DePalma & Atkinson 2006, 2007, in press), which took place in three overlapping phases between 2004 and 2006, incorporating the following modes of data collection:

- in-depth interviews with 72 practising and prospective primary teachers, including teachers who explicitly self-identified as lesbian, gay or straight. This research ran from September 2005 to August 2006 and was supported by a HEFCE-funded Research Development Fellowship;
- a university-wide online discussion entitled 'The Diversity Discussion Forum' funded by the Nuffield foundation, which ran from November 2004 to February 2005; and
- an online teachers' discussion forum entitled 'Challenging homophobia: Does every child matter?' hosted by the General Teaching Council for England from January to April 2006.

Our discussion webs revealed the many ways in which heteronormativity is discursively maintained, including assumptions that homosexuality is defined exclusively by sexual acts; that homosexuals are sexually dangerous; that children are asexual and innocent; that the normative is natural rather than socially constructed; and that sexuality is a private bodily issue that has no place in public, disembodied spaces such as schools. Similarly, many of our teachers' narratives in interviews discursively sustained fears, motivations and silences that have a significant impact on children, teachers and schools, comprising a web of perceptions and histories that serve to support heteronormativity, but which also hold the potential to disrupt it.

Our analysis of this earlier research has suggested that non-normative sexualities and gender identities attract what Patai (1992) describes as 'surplus visibility', while uncritical adherence to notions of civility (Mayo, 2002) prevents the exploration of these identities within educational contexts. This earlier research gave rise to some key principles in *No Outsiders* project design:

1. It must be voluntary and teacher-centred.

The varying manifestations of antagonism, ambivalence and fear expressed on our discussion forums and in teacher interviews clearly indicated that a top-down approach would be likely to meet with strong resistance, even more than in the case of other diversity and social inclusion initiatives:

2. It must be publicly supported and recognized by powerful government and educational bodies.

Teachers were very clear that official sanction was an important factor in giving them the freedom to act. Otherwise, they ran the risk of being perceived as radicals 'banging a drum' according to their particular personal interests:

3. It must be collective and involve strong collegial support.

Teachers expressed a great deal of apprehension at undertaking such unfamiliar and potentially controversial projects on their own:

4. It must be informed by expertise and supplied with resources.

We found virtually no one in our exploratory research who felt confident to plan, much less initiate, projects that would include LGBT identities within or beyond

the curriculum. In fact, very few people were able to imagine what that might look like, even when their schools had explicit curricular inclusion policies around race, ethnicity, religion and disability.

Given these guiding principles, we set out to design a practice-based project that would: draw upon teachers' creativity and personal knowledge, while at the same time providing expert guidance in research methodologies; give teachers flexibility, while at the same time providing institutional support; and allow teachers autonomy, while at the same time providing a collegial support network. In the remainder of this paper, we will explore how putting these principles into practice has opened the door to significant changes in participating teacher-researchers' practice and, often, in the practice of their colleagues, through actions at both macro- and micro-level. We will also explore how the *dissensus* principle of our PAR community of practice has resulted in different kinds of approaches that are underpinned by different theoretical understandings of what proactive school-based sexualities equality work might entail.

Guiding principles revisited: how are these manifesting in the *No Outsiders* project?

As the project teachers have begun to implement the project aims in their own particular settings, we are beginning to see how our guiding principles have begun to play out in practice. Revisiting each of these principles, we will describe some of the specific ways in which they have manifested themselves in the actual processes and outcomes of the teachers' individual action research projects, drawing on accounts from the teacher-researchers themselves and on debates across the project team.

1. It must be voluntary and teacher-centred

Questions of practical action and its underpinnings in theory. One of the most significant features of the project has been the freedom of teacher-researchers to choose their own focus, direction and pace, with the support of the rest of the research team. Our project schools represent a wide variety of local settings, ranging from schools in urban settings serving diverse ethnic and religious communities to those in various rural settings, including a tiny village church school. In some cases, opportunities have arisen for teacher-researchers to take immediate action, often based on existing practices or developments within their own practice settings. For example, Kate,[5] a teacher in a city school, had the opportunity to link her work for the project with a city-wide arts project on respect for difference for Holocaust Memorial Day (27 January), incorporating a discussion of lesbian and gay marginalisation into the wider project work. Annie (the Personal, Social, Health and Citizenship Education advisor for one Local Authority) drew on the project's diversity training and communication network to complete already-planned guidance on challenging homophobia in primary schools, linking up with two other project teachers, Boni and Andy, in order to connect school-level and authority-level thinking. In addition,

Andy extended his already comprehensive scheme of work for emotional literacy (which is being used by a number of schools in his Local Authority) to include the use of the gay-affirmative children's books provided by the project.

The freedom to take their project work in whatever direction teacher-researchers chose, however, has led to an ongoing debate about the extent to which the use of these books might lead to strategies that reinforce essentialist binaries (gay/straight, male/female). Some teachers, for example, have chosen to take what might be considered a 'strategic essentialist' approach (Guha & Spivak, 1988), drawing consciously upon essentialist categories of gay and straight as a way to normalise non-heterosexuality. As Andy put it:

> I am trying to be a good gay role model. Because I didn't have one when I was growing up. And I knew by the time I was ten or eleven. I didn't know I was gay but I knew I was different and if I had someone say it's okay to be gay I would have remembered that at some point…When I did realise that I was gay I would have remembered that Mr so and so was gay and he was alright…

Andy quite consciously came out to his pupils just before his civil partnership in the hope that by extending the ways in which the marriages of heterosexual people are celebrated and discussed in primary schools, he could help make gay relationships part of the everyday fabric of school life:

> (My colleagues) will ask about (my partner) in front of people, it's about being out and talking with people just like heterosexual people talk about their weekend with their wives and their girlfriends.

Just before he celebrated his own civil partnership, Miles, a head teacher, held an assembly for year 4 and 5 classes in his school. He connected his own upcoming celebration with a reading of the book *King and king* (de Haan & Nijland, 2002), a story of two princes who fall in love:

> I started by reading King & King which some of the children were familiar with. At the end of the book I commented there was a similarity for me as I would be marrying my partner who was male in the half term holiday…During lunchtime many children congratulated me and wished me well. At the end of the day a group of girls came to my room with some cards they had made for [us]. A parent and her three children also came with a card and a bottle of wine as she was 'just so pleased and wanted you to know how great we think it is'.

These vignettes illustrate Andy and Miles' attempts to disrupt the heteronormative processes that have systematically denied lesbians and gay men privileges usually reserved for heterosexuals. Not only do they claim their right to have their partnerships recognised in law, recently conferred by the UK Government via the Civil Partnership Act (brought into force in the UK in December 2005), but by doing this in a public primary school space they insist that their privilege become normalised (in the form of the everyday naming of Andy's partner and of Miles' celebratory cards and wine).

Nevertheless, such normalising processes have not been uncritically accepted by everyone in the project. Annie, who identifies as a straight woman, has drawn upon a

feminist perspective to critique the very institution of marriage that some lesbian and gay activists have been fighting to be included in:

> I never got married, I am a feminist…yet all these gay people around me are rushing into civil ceremonies and these fancy weddings. And there is a part of me that wants to go excuse me, excuse me, do you know what a wedding is all about, it's about property. I didn't want my father to walk me down the aisle and give me away to another man as a virgin.

This debate has already arisen elsewhere in our research (see Atkinson & DePalma, 2009) and we have also come to recognise that many of us hold these conflicting perspectives simultaneously and may act on each according to the demands of the moment. It is not our intention to imply that the dissenting views represented here demonstrate clear divisions between coherent points of view, but rather dialogue among different voices that are 'by nature contradictory and partial' (Ellsworth, 1992, p. 312).

Questions of theoretical engagement. We have found that this guiding principle of free choice has gone beyond what we originally imagined (in terms of focus, direction and pace) and has extended more deeply to teachers adopting different fundamental frameworks for defining action. It has also become apparent that teacher-researchers within the project have a free choice as to whether or not they engage at all with the interpretation and theorisation of the data. Initially we, the project leaders, wanted to ensure that all teacher-researchers participated (democratically, we thought at the time) in the process of theorisation and we began by providing teacher-researchers with training in research methodology and theory. Nevertheless, we have realised that expecting teachers to learn the tools and discourses of our academic practice (while we academics tended to keep out of theirs) was neither helpful nor particularly democratic. Furthermore, while for some teachers, the ongoing interpretation of data provides a valuable additional strand to their practical involvement in the project's work, the interest of others is solely in the practical implications of the project development and outcomes. Many teachers who choose not to engage formally with data analysis and theorising continue to write field notes describing and analysing their practice and engage in useful and insightful discussions on the website. As Laura put it, 'I think if we want teacher autonomy, we accept that, mostly, deeper interrogations of heteronormativity will be confined to research papers rather than practice in classrooms'.

2. It must be publicly supported and recognised by powerful government and educational bodies

We have made it clear from the outset that this project supports English primary schools in meeting their statutory obligations. While this may not have been in the minds of policy makers, it is hard to see how schools can ensure that the safety, physical and emotional wellbeing and positive life prospects of *all* children[6] be met without including sexualities equality within a broader equalities agenda. In

addition, the introduction of civil partnerships requires that schools recognise same-sex parents, Sex and Relationship Education guidance encompasses non-heterosexual as well as heterosexual relationships and the existence of loving and stable relationships outside marriage (Department for Education and Employment, 2000) and the recently published DCSF guidance *Safe to learn* (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007) provides teachers with government-sanctioned tools for challenging homophobic bullying in primary and secondary schools.

While it has not necessarily been our aim to *meet* government requirements in this work, it gives our project participants added confidence to know that what they are doing supports them in meeting their statutory obligations. Our position has been eloquently summarised by Alan Luke (2006), who identified the role of the critical educational researcher and activist as finding the *spaces* in policy and policy-making in which critical work can be done.

Nevertheless, government support can be something of a double-edged sword. As Ellis writes in his critique of *Stand up for us: Challenging homophobia in schools* (Department for Education and Skills & Department of Health, 2004), the careful editing and 'low-key' release of this document contribute to an overall discourse of (silent) tolerance:

> Stand up for us is a plea for tolerance that just doesn't even speak about what is to be tolerated never mind trying to develop teachers' and students' understandings of how heteronormativity or compulsory heterosexuality creates the very conditions in which homophobia is produced. (Ellis, 2007, p. 21)

In this sense, we recognise that by helping teachers to couch their work on the *No Outsiders* project in the existing government guidelines we may be offering them the security to engage in professionally risky, ground-breaking equalities work, but that this government support does come with ideological strings attached. Teacher-researchers have also adopted different approaches to introducing and explaining their project work to parents and colleagues, with some drawing more explicitly than others on government support while others have taken this support to mean that they need not explicitly justify their project work to parents. While some team members have argued that seeking the approval of colleagues and parent governors implies that sexualities equality work is somehow less valid than other equalities work (such as race and disability) that forms a part of the expected curriculum, others have felt more comfortable explicitly establishing a rationale for their *No Outsiders* work. Katherine, for example, prepared a Powerpoint presentation for parent governors:

> I made the decision with my head (teacher) that I wanted to have a meeting with the governors to tell them what we were doing because I felt at this stage a little bit that if we just went ahead with it quietly in our classrooms it was a bit cloak and dagger.

Judy's preparations to participate in the project involved an even longer process of justifying the work to colleagues and parents, then rewriting school policies:

> (It has been a) long process of putting systems in place and making sure that we've covered, it's almost putting the school in a safe zone and through the governors…my job now is to sort of look through the inclusion policy and anti-bullying policy and make

> sure those issues [of homophobia are] actually in the policy before we can actually take the project forward, before we can actually do the doing bit.

Sue has taken the approach of helping teachers in her schools weave sexualities equality work in with safer, more established kinds of equalities work:

> We did a lot of work on disability equality so the staff were very used to thinking about equalities issues…so in a way were in a strong position bringing in sexuality equalities issues as well…We actually had an equalities links section so that people could very clearly link in how each area of study they were doing would link in with race equality and disability equality and sexuality equalities work.

These cautious beginnings demonstrate that most teachers have felt themselves to be in no position to go very far beyond what they could justify in terms of government policy, which itself often needs to be stretched somewhat to reach beyond careful tolerance discourses. When one feels only just barely supported in 'challenging homophobia' in often vague terms, reading a book where two princes fall in love can still seem a risky endeavour.

3. It must be collective and involve strong collegial support

The project was designed to counteract the isolation that teachers can experience within their classrooms. This isolation may be particularly intense for teachers working for sexualities equality: there are few or no existing resources or experiences to draw upon, and this work (as our earlier research has shown, see Atkinson & DePalma, 2008b) is sometimes seen as subversive and risky within local school communities. To this end we have designed the project to form an external support community for these teachers, combining occasional face-to-face meetings with a constant virtual meeting space in the form of the project website.

Some, but not all, teachers have chosen to participate on the website discussion boards as a way to communicate with distant colleagues. We expressly designed this participation to be voluntary in light of teachers' considerable time demands, but with the hope that it might provide some teachers with the support they need. Teachers have used these discussion boards in various ways, for example:

Reporting on and discussing both planned classroom activities and unplanned incidents. When Laura implemented her two-week unit on alternative fairytales, she began by starting a new discussion thread announcing her intention to 'plan a unit that looks at ways that the themes in fairytales can be changed and adapted—using some project books'. In this initial posting she described her thoughts so far and solicited advice from the rest of the project team. This web-based discussion ran through and beyond the course of Laura's teaching of the unit and included planning, theoretical reflection, descriptions of children's reactions, interpretations of these reactions and speculation on how parents might react to their children's work. Finally, in response to Andi's request during this discussion, Laura posted her unit pans in the public section of the website.

The project was designed to both interrogate and interrupt the operation of heteronormativity in project schools and project teachers are encouraged to give as much

attention to the interrogation of everyday incidents that occur in their school as to planned curriculum activities. Opportunities for collective reflection on day-to-day events and reactions have helped to reveal themes and/or processes, one of the most significant of which is proving to be what Youdell (2004) describes as 'performative reinscription': the generation of new (and positive) meanings or associations for injurious terms or concepts. (For a deeper exploration of this concept in relation to this research, see Atkinson & DePalma, 2009.) Laura's interventions in the routine process of exploring 'alternative' fairytales in the context of the National Literacy Strategy constituted one such disruption. For Laura and for many of the other project teachers, however, these disruptions occur outside curriculum contexts. Andy, who last year came out to his Year 3 pupils by announcing his civil partnership, has reported a series of small vignettes where children expressed their sometimes contradictory and shifting understandings of his sexuality. These vignettes have led to an ongoing discussion of ways in which children reconcile implicit assumptions of heteronormativity with new information that challenges these assumptions and this has also connected with some of Laura's observations coming out of her alternative fairytales unit.

Teasing out theoretical issues. While not all of the project members are equally interested or immersed in the theory behind the project, some project members have used the web discussions to discuss and examine theory, and these discussions have included how (and whether) theorising is useful. There has been, for example, an extensive discussion about the nature of 'queering' and whether/to what extent what teachers are doing in classrooms is 'queer'. When one of the project leaders encouraged Andy to move away from fixed identity categories in the introduction to an early years teaching resource that he'd written, Andy posted these comments to the website and began a debate around them. First, he posted Elizabeth's comments:

> I think the key is to strike a balance between keeping things clear-cut and simple…and being clear that life isn't actually that simple—that sexual identity is a fluid and changing thing, at least for some people…It's not necessarily about being confused, but simply about variability in relationships and identities.

Then Andy posted his own perspective:

> I have to say I don't really agree with your comments with regard to variability in relationships and identities. While I am aware that I might be putting children into boxes, I think its important to give children something to identify with if they feel different. By saying 'sexuality is fluid…' aren't you supporting the theory that we all choose and we can be straight if we try?

As mentioned earlier, project members differed in whether they saw themselves as taking a queer perspective as exemplified by Elizabeth's emphasis on fluid sexualities and taking on an approach of strategic essentialism, as exemplified by Andy's 'giving children something to identify with'. Many of us began to examine our own contradictions and inconsistencies in the course of these discussions. Andy later reflected:

> I've been thinking all morning about our discussion re identity and I can see where you are coming from. I talked to a colleague who said I was clearly only interested in pushing 'my gay agenda' (!) which I thought was a bit harsh—but it really made me think about what agenda I am pushing. I always say 'You're gay or you're straight and that's it', but actually I should be saying so much more.

This excerpt is not included here to demonstrate that Andy has changed his mind, but to illustrate how he complicates his own perspective: a process that has been shared by many of us during the course of the project. Neither was Deb, a university researcher, equivocating her strong queer theory perspective when she wrote:

> What's important to me is QUEER PRACTICE, practices that trouble hetero/homo binaries, practices…So for me queer isn't about an identity, although it is the one I feel most comfortable with, but I'm often also strategically a lesbian

These kinds of theoretical discussions have allowed us all to interrogate our own perspectives without feeling the need to arrive at a consensus which would probably require silencing of less powerful voices.

Identity work. The collaborative nature of the project has led us to explore a range of ways in which issues of identity intersect with the research. We have found that the questions of who we are and how we present ourselves are inextricably intertwined with what we do and how we do it and discussing these connections has been a part of our collective inquiry. This has led us, for example, to explore the power hierarchies between university-based and school-based members of the research team (DePalma & Teague, 2007), our different religious perspectives and their impact on the research (Nixon & Givens, 2008; Nixon & East, 2008), how our sexual identities position us with respect to the project (Allan, 2007) and the ways in which engagement in the project has rekindled dormant activisms (Atkinson, 2008).

Debates generated on the web and in face-to-face discussion have included attempts to answer the following questions, which, in turn, have emerged from our own practice and lived experiences: what happens when a new lesbian teacher (who is not out with her pupils or their parents) role-playing a lesbian Cinderella is asked by a child, while the teacher is in role, whether or not she is *really* gay? What kind of risks are taken when a lesbian teacher responds to a boy's observation that homosexuality is 'minging' (disgusting) by asking him if he finds her disgusting as she is gay and what kind of power is enacted in this small incident of strategic self-disclosure? What are the advantages and disadvantages, for gay and lesbian teachers, of allowing children to assume they are straight and is it safer for experienced teachers to violate these assumptions? Are there ways in which straight members of the team are better positioned to campaign for sexualities equality and are there ways in which allies might unintentionally undermine the struggle of lesbian and gay activists?

Overall, the opportunity to engage with colleagues in debates over questions such as these, whether face-to-face, by email or through web-based discussions, has been a key element in enabling teachers to go forward with work that can feel stressful, controversial and unsupported in their immediate surroundings. These discussions are designed to help create an external professional community that can support

teachers who might lack this kind of support locally. Boni, a head teacher, reported that she had finally used, with some trepidation, the word 'homophobic' in a school assembly on bullying and reported this with an air of triumph at a project development day. Kate, who after over a decade of teaching came out to her pupils in response to a child's homophobic comment, reflected afterwards that she would not have had the courage to do this without knowing that she had the support of the Project team behind her. Laura, after completing her alternative fairytales project, expressed similar thoughts in an email:

> This is all very exciting stuff! I remember saying (to) you last year that anyone who was even out at school was very brave—back then I couldn't imagine being—I never would have thought I'd be doing all this!

We believe that these testimonies highlight the extreme difficulty of addressing sexualities equality as an individual teacher in an individual school and demonstrate how powerful and necessary the simple support of like-minded colleagues is to this work. They also demonstrate that this collegial support need not be all hand-holding and back-patting, but can be based on discussion with dissent without destroying the collective endeavour.

4. It must be informed by expertise and supplied with resources

Providing resources. Those teachers in our earlier interviews who agreed that sexualities equality should be addressed in the primary school were unanimous in asserting that a simple lack of information was one of the chief obstacles keeping them from doing so. For this reason, each school in the project received an extensive pack of children's books and other support materials and in-service training focusing on sexualities equality, complemented by follow-up support where requested. The training is designed to help school staff understand the processes of homophobia and heteronormativity, make them aware of the legal support for addressing LGBT equalities and provide them with some ideas for doing so in schools.

The resources made available to the teacher-reasearchers includes some 25 children's books, the majority of which explicitly include lesbian or gay characters or explore gender stereotypes and non-gender-conformity, as well as video resources and posters. The collection of resources has grown as the project has progressed and teacher-researchers have also contributed their own lesson plans and school policies. Some teachers have designed curricular projects around some of these resources: Laura incorporated *King and king* (de Haan & Nijland, 2002), a story of two princes who fall in love, into her alternative fairytales unit. Jon has incorporated an animated film called *Tomboy* (Taylor & Pendleton-Jiménez, 2006) into an art unit on colours to explore colour-based and gender stereotyping. John is working with Year 6 pupils on the libretto for an opera based on two of these books: *And Tango makes three* (Parnell & Richardson, 2005) and *Oliver Button is a sissy* (DePaola, 1979).

In many of the project schools teachers are finding themselves representatives of the project in many ways that have been mediated by the books; Andy's PHSE advisor has been inspired to purchase the set of books for use throughout the Local

Authority, teachers have participated in book exhibitions and workshops in a wide variety of venues outside the school and, in one case, the books have prompted a debate beyond the school boundaries as colleagues have taken them home to share with families and friends. In this sense, the interest generated by the books both within and beyond their immediate school environments has helped to position teachers as experts with resources rather than individuals with a personal agenda 'banging their own drum' (DePalma & Atkinson, in press).

One head teacher reflected on how the books were being used throughout his school:

> Teachers have used the project books in story sessions during the week and class assemblies linked to PSHCE…Some of the stories provide a great starting point for children's discussions. Comments range from a nursery child who is unsure that you can have a family with 'two daddies' like the penguin in *And Tango makes three* to a child in Y5 who knew a child with two mums who would like *The daddy machine* as she would understand how it felt.

For many teachers, simply having these books in the school has made a significant impact. As our earlier research suggests, the silence around sexualities in general in primary schools is a powerful force that renders problematic any attempt to break it. A book about two people who fall in love, two penguins raising a chick or a teenage boy deciding whether and how to 'fit in' can become a dangerous presence if the two people both happen to be princes, the two penguins both happen to be male and the teenage boy happens to be gay. In the UK it was a book about a small girl, her daddy and his (male) partner that instigated Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act,[7] which, despite its repeal in England in 2003, was still cited by some of our participants as a deterrent to even mentioning gay and lesbian identities in the classroom (DePalma & Atkinson, in press). In this climate, simply opening the box containing the project books in the staff room becomes a risky political act. Andi has reflected on how the arrival of the books has created ripples throughout her school, beginning with initial nervous laughter and jokes in her staff room. The revisiting of the books more recently, however, in the context of an inclusion week at Andi's school, led to colleagues requesting more stories of the same sort to read to their classes.

When the books arrived at Andy's school, he simply brought them all to his staff room and invited his colleagues to take three each, use them and let him know how it went. The books have reflected the concrete presence of the project in the schools. Laura reflected on the meaningfulness of this presence:

> The books…yes, having the books in my classroom and, in Andy's case, throughout the school is/are queer acts because…they have resulted in discussions that wouldn't have happened otherwise without them…I think just having the books there pushes the boundaries a little in terms of what is allowed in the classroom and what isn't and what we can talk about etc.

Debating resources. As well as providing an invaluable source of support, the use of these resources has also contributed to the dissensus within the project. An on-going debate among the project team is around the danger of re-inscribing certain social norms, such as monogamy and child-bearing, through books that portray gay and lesbian people within these normative families, such as Parnell and Richardson's

(2005) *And Tango makes three*: a particularly well-loved project book telling the true story of two male penguins who raise a chick together. Laura raised the concern in the web discussion:

> I'm really concerned about the ways in which I find myself latching on to knowable safe images of gay daddies and lesbian mummies or at least gay and lesbian couples falling in love. I guess I'm partly led to this safe, middle of the road place by the project books which inscribe these notions of romantic, monogamous relationships (albeit with gay people or penguins rather than straight ones).

Andy, however, rejected the notion that we need to move beyond gay penguins:

> I just like the fact that we are talking about gay penguins. I don't think we need to get beyond that at this stage. We are in the early stages of this nationally, this sort of thought process. The fact that we've got gay penguins is fantastic, why do we need to worry about what's next? We need to get schools to do, to talk about gay penguins because at the moment…most schools aren't doing anything.

The debate over whether or not we need to 'move beyond gay penguins' is one manifestation of the tension between strategic essentialist and queer approaches that runs throughout the project. As Andy argues, children need to recognise the category 'gay' in order to undo a socially constructed incommensurability between the category of 'gay' and the category of 'loving parents' usually reserved for straight people, an argument we have made elsewhere (Atkinson & DePalma, 2009). As Laura argues, however, this essentialism, however strategic, runs the risk of reifying categories that a queer project seeks to disrupt (reinforcing, for example, the perceived superiority of the particular type of monogamous, child-centred family relationship embodied by the penguins). Talburt argues that introducing LGBT role models and fighting for LGBT acceptance is simply another form of tolerance discourse (Talburt & Steinberg, 2000). As mentioned earlier, we continue to negotiate what the endeavour of going 'beyond tolerance' actually looks like and what role daddy penguins, civil partnerships and gay and lesbian teachers might have in our collective endeavour.

Conclusion

Even though the project has not completed its 28-month remit at the time of writing, a growing body of data is emerging which suggests that this research embodies 'best practice' in a sense which has been lost under the effects of what Bronwen Davies (2007) describes, in her critique of the drive towards 'excellence' and narrow conceptions of achievement, as 'neo-liberal dressage'. Furthermore, it embodies what Elizabeth St Pierre (2007) drawing on Deleuze (1995) describes as 'belief in the world' and the powerful effects of small events:

> When, in the forlorn fog of war that surrounds scientifically based research, I fear I'm losing my belief in the world, I try to precipitate events that elude control, small acts of resistance, Deleuze's pure becomings, that might lead elsewhere. (p. 8)

It is through such 'small acts of resistance' that participants in this project seek not only to understand the processes of heteronormativity within primary schools, but to

develop effective means of challenging it. Praxis, the combination of reflection and purposeful action, or 'acts which shape and change the world' (Smith, 1994, p.162) is a central tenet of the project, yet this praxis takes different forms for different project participants.

Maintaining a praxis-oriented collective endeavour requires constant vigilance lest we succumb to the theoretical pull of academia or to the impatience of activists to simply get on with the doing. The project has been inspired in part by the frustration of our activist colleagues: an LGBT-rights activist who has become tired of research that keeps revealing over and over how bad things are in school for LGBT youth; a lesbian head teacher who told us that the last thing we need is more discussion about whether or not it's OK to pursue sexualities equality in schools. We have also been inspired by our university colleagues: a researcher who worries that the project will turn into the simple unreflective doing of projects in schools and lose the potential for real critique and analysis, the sceptics who understand action research as an atheoretical and apolitical venture. We are also keenly aware, as project leaders, that our praxis as project team members will be shaped by our different institutional, social and identity positionings and that maintaining this diverse praxis community requires us to do what may be the most difficult task for any academic researcher: to share control.

Notes

1. Project reference: RES-062-23-0095. The project ran from September 2006 to December 2008.
2. We gratefully acknowledge the contributions made by the whole project team, both to the project as a whole and to discussions that have informed our thinking in the current paper. At this point in the project, the teacher-researchers are identified by first names only for reasons of confidentiality.
3. In English schools, school councils are composed of representatives of the pupil body—usually elected by their peers—who meet regularly with staff to discuss key issues and develop policies, for example on agreed codes of conduct within the school.
4. We are choosing to use the term 'sexualities equality' within this research, because we feel it evokes most clearly the concerns and issues being addressed. However, we acknowledge that there are champions of LGBT equality who would oppose this position, feeling that it is vital, above all, to be clear about the LGBT issues we are addressing.
5. Teacher-researchers have chosen to be identified by their own first names in papers and presentations, rather than choosing pseudonyms. This has been part of the democratic decision-making within the project, where it was felt that to hide teacher-researchers' identities entirely was to deny them ownership and authorship of their own work.
6. These are the central principles of *Every child matters*, the government documentation that now underpins all work with children (see the *Every child matters* website at http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/aims/).
7. Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act stated that a local authority shall not 'promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship'.

References

Aimers, J. (1999) *Using participatory action research in a local government setting.* Available online at: http://www.behs.cchs.usyd.edu.au/arow/reader/aimers.htm (accessed 14 February 2008).

Allan, A., Hemingway, J. & Jennett, M. (2007) No Outsiders? Grappling with issues of sexual identities in group research. Paper presented at the *Annual Meeting of the British Education Research Association*, Institute of Education, University of London, 5–8 September.

Associated Press (2006) *Parents say children's book too gay.* Available online at: http://www.outinuk.com/home/news.asp?articleid=10872 (accessed 20 January 2007).

Atkinson, E. (2008) Resisting compliance and rocking the boat: rekindling activism through lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender equality work in primary schools. Paper presented at the *Discourse Power Resistance Conference*, Manchester, Metropolitan University, UK, 18–20 March.

Atkinson, E. & DePalma, R. (2008a) Dangerous spaces: Constructing and contesting sexual identities in an online discussion forum, *Gender and Education*, 20(2), 183–194.

Atkinson, E. & DePalma, R. (2008b) Imagining the homonormative: performative subversion in education for social justice, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 29(1), 25–35.

Atkinson, E. & DePalma, R. (2009) Unbelieving the matrix: Queering consensual heteronormativity, *Gender & Education*, 21(1), 17–29.

Bakhtin, M. M. & Emerson, C. (1999) *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics* (Vol. 8) (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press).

Butler, J. (1999) *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity* (10th anniversary edn) (London, Routledge).

Crozier, G. (2003) Researching Black parents: making sense of the role of research and the researcher, *Qualitative Research*, 3(1), 79–94.

Cull, M., Platzer, H. & Balloch, S. (2006) *Out on my own: understanding the experiences and needs of homeless lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth.* Available online at: http://www.bright-on.ac.uk/sass/research/reports/LGBT_summary.pdf (accessed 9 March 2007).

Dalley, P. & Campbell, M. D. (2006) Constructing and contesting discourses of heteronormativity: an ethnographic study of youth in a francophone high school in Canada, *Journal of Language, Identity and Education*, 5(1), 11–29.

Davies, B. (2007) Governmentality and academic work: shaping the hearts and minds of academic workers. Paper presented at the *Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association*, Chicago, 9–13 April.

de Castell, S. & Jenson, J. (2002) *No place like home: final research report on the Pridehouse Project.* Available online at: http://www.sfu.ca/pridehouse/documents/pridehousefinalreport.pdf (accessed August 17 2005).

Deleuze, G. (1995) *Negotiations: 1972–1990* (Martin Joughin, Trans.) (New York, Columbia University Press).

de Haan, L. & Nijland, S. (2002) *King and king* (Berkeley, CA, Tricycle Press).

DePalma, R. & Atkinson, E. (2006) The sound of silence: talking about sexual orientation and schooling, *Sex Education*, 6(4), 333–349.

DePalma, R. & Atkinson, E. (2007) Strategic embodiment in virtual spaces: Exploring an online discussion about sexualities equality in schools, *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 28(4), 499–514.

DePalma, R. & Atkinson, E. (in press) 'Permission to talk about it': narratives of sexualities equality in the primary classroom, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 15(7).

DePalma, R. & Teague, L. (2008) A democratic community of practice: Unpicking all those words, *Educational Action Research*, 16(4), 441–456.

DePaola, T. (1979) *Oliver Button is a sissy* (San Diego, CA, Harcourt Trade Publishers).

Department for Children Schools and Families (2007) *Safe to learn: embedding anti-bullying work in schools.* Available online at: http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/_doc/11911/HOMOPHOBIC%20BULLYING.pdf (accessed 26 October 2007).

Department for Education and Employment (2000) Sex and relationship education guidance. Available online at: http://www.dfes.gov.uk/sreguidance/sexeducation.pdf#search=%22DfES%20Sex%20and%20Relationship%20Guidance%202000%22 (accessed 29 September 2006).

Department for Education and Skills (2002) *Bullying: don't suffer in silence.* Available online at: www.dfes.gov.uk/bullying (accessed 29 September 2006).

Department for Education and Skills & Department of Health (2004) *Stand up for us.* Available online at: www.wiredforhealth.gov.uk/standupforus (accessed 30 September, 2006).

Donelson, R. & Rogers, T. (2004) Negotiating a research protocol for studying school-based gay and lesbian issues, *Theory into Practice*, 43(2), 128–135.

Dyson, S., Mitchell, A., Smith, A., Dowsett, G., Pitts, M. & Hillier, L. (2003) Don't ask, don't tell. Hidden in the crowd: the need for documenting links between sexuality and suicidal behaviours among young people, *Monograph series #45.*

Ellis, V. (2007) Sexualities and schooling in England after Section 28: measuring and managing 'at risk' identities, *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education*, 4(3), 13–30.

Ellsworth, E. (1992) Why doesn't this feel empowering? Working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy, in: C. Luke & J. Gore (Eds) *Feminisms and critical pedagogy* (New York, Routledge), 90–119.

Epstein, D. & Johnson, R. (1998) *Schooling sexualities* (Buckingham England, Open University Press).

Epstein, D., O'Flynn, S. & Telford, D. (2003) *Silenced sexualities in schools and universities* (Stoke-on-Trent, Trentham Books).

Fairclough, N. (1988) *Language and power* (London, Longman).

Foucault, M. (1979) *The history of sexuality. Volume 1: an introduction* (Harmondsworth, Penguin).

Freire, P. (1986) *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (New York, Continuum).

Gee, J. P. (1996) *Social linguistics and literacies: ideology in discourses* (2nd ed.) (London, Taylor & Francis).

Guha, R. & Spivak, G. C. (1988) *Selected subaltern studies* (Delhi, Oxford University Press).

Harvey, L. (1990) *Critical social research* (London, Unwin Hyman).

Lanaspa, J. G. & Galán, J. I. P. (2006) *Homofobia en el systema educativo.* Available online at: http://www.miescuelayelmundo.org/article.php3?id_article=600 (accessed 21 January 2007).

Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991) Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation (Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press).

Letts, W. J. & Sears, J. T. (1999) *Queering elementary education: advancing the dialogue about sexualities and schooling* (Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield).

Luke, A. (2006) How to make educational policy using Foucault and Bourdieu. Paper presented at the *American Educational Research Association*, San Francisco, CA, 7–11 April.

Mac an Ghaill, M. (1994) *The making of men: masculinities, sexualities and schooling* (Buckingham, Open University Press).

Mayo, C. (2002) The bind that ties: civility and social difference, *Educational Theory*, 52(2), 169–186.

McCready, L. T. (2004) Understanding the marginalization of gay and gender non-conforming Black male students, *Theory into Practice*, 43(2), 136–143.

Moita-Lopes, L. P. (2006) Queering literacy teaching: analyzing gay-themed discourses in a fifth-grade class in Brazil, *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 5(1), 31–50.

National Mental Health Association (2005) Bullying in schools: harassment puts gay youth at risk. Available online at: http://www.nmha.org/pbedu/backtoschool/bullyingGayYouth.pdf (accessed 1 July 2005).

Nayak, A. & Kehily, M. J. (2006) Gender undone: subversion, regulation and embodiment in the work of Judith Butler, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 27(4), 459–472.

Nixon, D. & East, S. (2008) Stirring it up or stirring it in? Perspectives on the development of sexualities equalities in faith-based primary schools. Paper presented at the *Discourse Power Resistance Conference*, Manchester, Metropolitan University, 18–20 March.

Nixon, D. & Givens, N. (2008, 3–6 September) Find the gap: Christian and atheist deconstructions of sexualities discourse in primary education. Paper presented at the *Annual Meeting of the Birtish Educational Research Association*, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh.

Parnell, P. & Richardson, J. (2005) *And Tango makes three* (New York, Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing).

Patai, D. (1992) Minority status and the stigma of 'surplus visibility', *Education Digest*, 57(5), 35–37.

Renold, E. (2000) 'Coming out': gender, (hetero)sexuality and the primary school, *Gender and Education*, 12(3), 309–326.

Renold, E. (2005) *Girls, boys, and junior sexualities: exploring children's gender and sexual relations in the primary school* (London, RoutledgeFalmer).

Smith, M. K. (1994) *Local education: community, conversation, praxis* (Buckingham, Open University Press).

Somekh, B. (2005) Transforming professional knowledge through a global action research community. Paper presented at the *First Congress for Qualitative Inquiry*, University of Illinois, 5–7 May.

St. Pierre, E. (2007) Everyday Foucault. Paper presented at the *Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association*, Chicago, 9–13 April.

Talburt, S. & Steinberg, S. R. (2000) *Thinking queer: sexuality, culture and education* (New York, Peter Lang).

Taylor, B. (Director) & Pendleton-Jiménez, K. (Writer) (2006) *Tomboy* [short video]. Coyle Productions.

Whittle, S., Turner, L. & Al-Alami, M. (2007) *Engendered penalties: transgender and transsexual people's experiences of inequality and discrimination.* Available online at: www.theequalitiesreview.org.uk (accessed 9 March 2007).

Winkelmann, C. L. (1991) Social acts and social systems: community as metaphor, *Linguistics and Education*, 3(1), 1–29.

Youdell, D. (2004) Wounds and re-inscriptions: school, sexualities and performative subjects, *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 25(4), 477–493.

Youdell, D. (2005) Sex-gender-sexuality: how sex, gender and sexuality constellations are constituted in secondary schools, *Gender and Education*, 17(3), 249–270.

Youdell, D. (2006) *Impossible bodies, impossible selves* (Dordrecht, Springer).