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# The sound of silence: talking about sexual orientation and schooling

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This paper arises from an online discussion project in the United Kingdom, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, in which higher education students and staff were invited to respond to a series of statements about sexual orientation in the context of schooling. This paper suggests that the silence of relative non-participation may have been exacerbated by other levels of silence operating within the wider social, political and educational context of the project. Analysis of data from the web forums revealed the perception of children as asexual beings, the sexualisation of homosexuality, and a tendency to separate the public and private domains. We also found some political correctness reflecting the legitimised diversity discourses operating within the university context without necessarily addressing the more uncomfortable questions behind them. Participants also imagined anxieties on the part of parents, teachers or pupils and diverted the discussion to other topics of concern, which may have served to protect them from direct engagement with the issues under discussion. In combination, we suggest that these factors create multiple layers of silence that serve to support the construction and maintenance of heteronormativity as well as demonstrating the power of the heterosexual matrix in action.

## Context of the project

Despite its importance in terms of pupil and teacher well-being, sexualities equality remains the one area of inclusion still largely unaddressed in schools, often because of teachers' own fears and concerns. This silence is often echoed by a prevailing view in the public arena that sexual orientation—including diverse family patterns—is not an appropriate focus for education, in spite of significant evidence demonstrating continuing disadvantage for non-heterosexual pupils and teachers (see, for example, Mason & Palmer, 1996; Douglas *et al.*, 1999; Ellis with High, 2004; Warwick *et al.*, 2004). In this paper, we report on aspects of a project funded by the Nuffield Foundation (project code SGS/00853/G) as part of an ongoing analysis of several web forums within the project. The web forums described in this paper were designed to explore these concerns via a number of identical anonymous web-based discussions, initially for trainee primary teachers and other higher education

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students, but then among a wider participant population across the whole of one university. In the forums, participants were invited to respond both to a series of topics or comments (see later) and to each other's comments on these topics. Interestingly, we found that invitations to groups of between 70 and 200 students on primary Initial Teacher Training, Early Childhood Studies, and Sociology courses yielded only a handful of responses, and it was for this reason that we opened a new version of the same forum to the wider university community.

One particular concern that related directly to the project focus was what to name the project without this in itself having an adverse effect on participation: the project title was changed at an early stage from 'The Sexualities Project' to 'The Diversity Discussion Project' in order to deflect any anxieties that might prevent potential participants even from entering the site. This in itself, of course, was a silencing effect, which operated on us as researchers as well as on our potential participants (for further discussion of the silencing effect of sexualities research, see Atkinson, 2004). Prior to the change of name, we found it difficult to discuss the project in public, and were aware of self-censorship in terms of to whom and in what contexts we mentioned it, with careful selection being as necessary in public and academic contexts as in private and family/social ones. This silence reflected that within the educational settings that were the focus of our discussion topics, and resulted in the feeling that we were obliged—and were obliging our participants—to speak in code about the focus of our own discussions.

## Exploring the discursive construction of the heteronormative matrix

This research forms part of a broader research agenda aimed at helping teachers recognise and challenge the heteronormativity implicit in school environments and educational practices. To this end, this initial phase of investigation was aimed at understanding the nature of heteronormative discourse in our society. In the second phase we collected data specifically about teachers' understandings of and responses to these discourses, through interviews with teachers, trainees, and teacher-trainers and through a web forum offered via the General Teaching Council of England to all UK teachers. We are currently using these data to help teachers design classroom approaches that will challenge heteronormative assumptions in a two-year ESRC-funded action research project called No Outsiders: Researching approaches to sexualities equality in primary schools.

Heteronormativity, or the 'organizational structures in schools that support heterosexuality as normal and anything else as deviant' (Donelson & Rogers, 2004, p. 128) is maintained not only in terms of what is said and done, but also in terms of what is left out of the official discourse. In this initial phase, we felt it was important to interrogate the assumptions underpinning heteronormativity in the broader society, since it would be naïve to assume that these discourses begin and end within the particular practice called 'schooling.' Therefore, it is important to remember that three of the discussion webs analysed here were open to university students (not exclusively trainee teachers) and one was open to an entire university community. Participation was

fully confidential; posters used pseudonyms and were not expected to identify themselves in any way. Since we were interested in exploring discursive patterns that would be available to participants as members of a society (in the UK, early-twenty-first-century, 'academic' university context) rather than the views of any particular group of people, the identity of respondents was neither the unit of analysis nor necessary for this analysis. The unit of analysis was instead the set of assumptions, connections, and discursive strategies deployed by and therefore available to our participants.

The discussions were thematically analysed in terms of how they discursively maintained or challenged 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. These discourses frame certain ways of thinking and doing as 'common sense' and thus unassailable. We looked for patterns of assumptions and implicit connections that might help to support the maintenance of silence on two levels: explicit arguments calling for silence around sexualities in primary schools, and patterns of silence within the discussions themselves.

## The silence surrounding sex–gender–sexuality

The silence surrounding sex–gender–sexuality generally in the context of schooling (see Atkinson, 2002) stands in stark contrast to the fervid discussions of these topics *outside* the curriculum, though still very much in the context of schooling, between pupils of both primary and secondary school age. Renold (2000) and Reay (2001), for example, have explored young children's sexual identity discourses, and Walkerdine (1997) has discussed the sexualisation of young girls in popular culture. Furthermore, the silence around the discussion of same-sex relationships within the curriculum, initially generated by the infamous Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act, which prohibited 'the promotion of homosexuality as a ''pretended'' family relationship', has scarcely been disturbed either by the repeal of Section 28 in England in 2003 or the Civil Partnerships Act that came into effect in December 2005. This is in spite of specific reference to homophobic bullying as an issue of concern in government guidelines for schools and school inspectors on social inclusion (Department for Education and Employment, 1999a; Office for Standards in Education, 1999), guidance on sensitivity to the needs of non-heterosexual pupils in sex and relationship education (Department for Education and Employment, 2000), and recognition of diversity in family relationships in guidance and inspection reports on personal, social and health education and citizenship (Department for Education and Employment, 1999b; Office for Standards in Education, 2005).

This is not to say that same-sex relationships are not addressed at all in school; but there remains an uneasiness in relation to homosexuality that marks it as very different from other aspects of identity. For example, the notion of gay teenage fiction still appeared outrageous enough in 2001 to prompt strong adverse comment among the contributors to the *children-literature-uk* email discussion group: a group composed of academics, researchers and writers who have a particular interest in (and in some cases, a significant voice in) the field of children's literature. This

discomfort persists despite the inclusion in the secondary curriculum of award-winning books such as Aidan Chambers' (1999) *Postcards from No-Man's Land* and Linda Newbery's (2003) *The Shell House*, both of which feature gay male relationships (see Atkinson & Szymanski, 2004). The aversion to books featuring same-sex relationships in the primary curriculum was, of course, enough in the 1980s for the introduction of *Jenny Lives with Eric and Martin* (Bosche, 1983) by the Inner London Education Authority to fuel the public and political outcry that led to the introduction of Section 28. Assumed recognition of this aversion still appeared to be sufficient nearly 20 years later, within our web forums, for a contributor to feel he/she needed to add no further explanation (but expected recognition of the significance of three exclamation marks) to the message he/she posted in response to the comment 'There should be more children's books about gay and lesbian families':

> Not sure if I like that idea of it being discussed in children's books!!![1]

In a 20-years-on follow-up to Trenchard and Warren's (1984) seminal study of gay teenagers' experience, Ellis with High (2004) found that while there were a greater number of 'mentions' of homosexuality in discussions in taught lessons than reported in the 1984 study, gay, lesbian and bisexual pupils did not always find them advantageous. Indeed, such 'mentions' often exacerbated existing tensions.

> In this study, we found that the discussion of homosexuality (in terms of 'mentions') had significantly increased since 1984 and that the number who regarded this as helpful had also significantly increased. However, the way in which homosexuality was mentioned was still regarded as unhelpful by the majority of the young people in our sample and there were strong associations with this perceived unhelpfulness and the moral interventions made by individual teachers. (Ellis with High, 2004, p. 223)

While Ellis and High are cautious about isolating a 'Section 28 effect', they suggest that Section 28 may have sanctioned a degree of moralising among teachers opposed to young people expressing lesbian, gay and bisexual identity in a way that has lasting effects beyond its repeal. We would like to suggest that the legal force of Section 28, the shadow of which remains long after its repeal, has combined with a number of other underlying and perhaps more subtle factors to knit a complex web of silences that have an effect, not only on levels of participation in discussions of sexual orientation in educational contexts, but on the layers of meaning expressed in those discussions.

## Discussion starters

The aim of the web forums was to provide a safe space for the discussion of sensitive issues, through enabling each participant to post messages anonymously. For this reason, it was not possible to determine the identity of posters or, in the case of the university-wide forum, to know whether they were students or staff. Each web forum contained the following topics for discussion, to which participants were invited to respond, as well as responding to each others' comments:

1. There should be more children's books about gay and lesbian families.
2. Discussing sexual orientation in class might make children gay.
3. Teachers should be trained to address issues related to sexual orientation in school.
4. Children in school are too young to be thinking about things like sexual orientation.
5. Gay and lesbian relationships are a normal part of life in our society.
6. All teachers, pupils, and parents have a right to be open about their sexuality.
7. Parents can teach their children about sexual orientation. The school has no right to interfere.
8. Children learn what they need to know about sexual orientation from each other, from magazines and from films and television.
9. An openly lesbian teacher introduces a discussion of same-sex parents into her classroom project on families.
10. A boy is being picked on by classmates who are calling him 'poofter', 'faggot', etc.
11. Please feel free to post your own discussion questions here, and to reply to other people's discussion questions.

## Levels of participation

Participation across all four webs was low. Before delving into a deeper textual analysis, it is important to gain an overview of participation patterns on these webs. In the first set of webs, three separate webs designed for university students, we had only a few postings (a total of 10 postings from six different posters). It is important to consider the meaning of participation. We considered what is often referred to as 'lurking,' or signing on and presumably reading messages without posting, as a legitimate means of participation. Nevertheless, it is only when participants post that others have something to respond to, and we suspect that the extremely low number of postings created a sort of spiral effect where posters may have signed on to read messages, found very few, and decided not to bother engaging in the discussion. We were able to determine the number of total participants as well as the number of posters and postings, and this information is summarised in Table 1. While the two researchers did participate on these webs using the single pseudonym 'Elizabeth,' these postings are removed from these numbers.[2]

This table illustrates the extremely low participation and posting rates for the first three webs, which inspired us to open the fourth web to the entire university community. It is important to point out that while the raw number of postings is much higher for the larger university community web, the participation ratio is similar to three of the initial student-only webs, suggesting that we cannot assume any difference in interest level based on participant occupation. Quite possibly the more successful engagement in the fourth web is simply due to the much higher number of people invited (the link to the forum was created on the WebCT

Table 1. Patterns of participation on all four webs

| | Total number invited to participate | Total participants | Participation ratio | Posters (excluding researchers) | Total postings |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Initial teacher training | 200 | 4 | 1:50 | 3 | 3 |
| Sociology | 75 | 2 | 1:37 | 2 | 6 |
| Early childhood studies | 140 | 1 | 1:140 | 1 | 1 |
| University-wide | 12,000 | 171 | 1:60 | 38 | 90 |

homepage of all 12,000 members of the university's academic community) resulting in more postings, which were, in turn, able to attract more posters.

While this fourth web yielded a reasonable discussion (90 postings), it by no means sustained this discussion consistently over time. A flurry of postings took place within the first week, with activity falling off sharply after that, and with virtually no activity (only eight postings) in the past two months (see Figure 1).

We also noticed that most participants who wrote messages posted no more than one or two postings, while a few individuals posted quite a lot, suggesting that the web discussion was not only very unevenly distributed over time, but was also dominated by a few relatively enthusiastic posters. Of the top three posters, one posted nine messages, the next posted six times, and the third most prolific poster was the researcher 'Elizabeth,' who posted five times (see Figure 2).

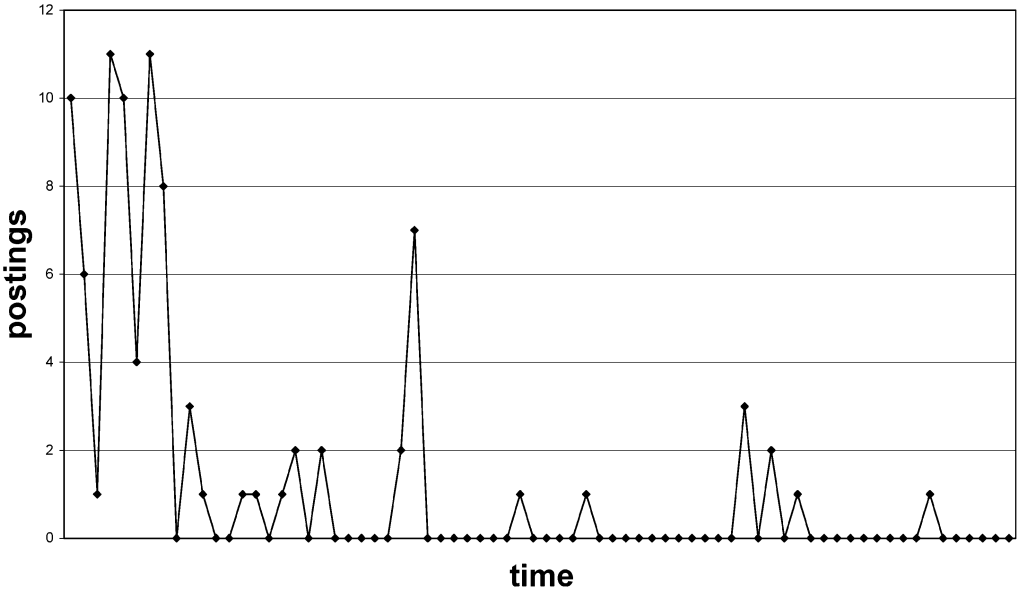


Figure 1. University web postings over a three-month period

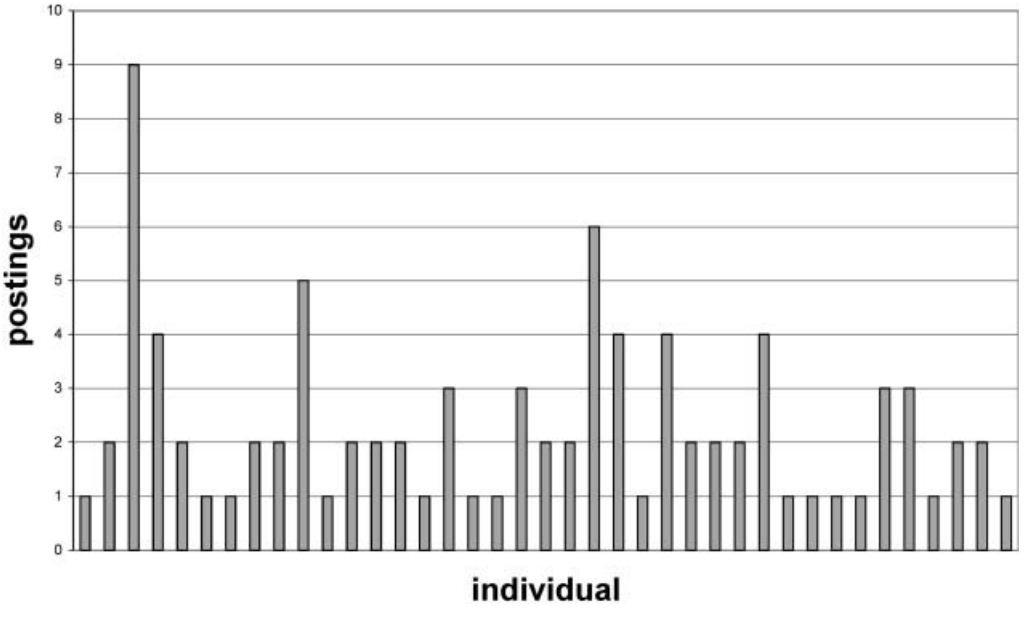


Figure 2. Number of university web postings per individual

Gaining participation on voluntary web-based discussions is a general problem, regardless of the nature of the discussion (Matusov *et al.*, 2005). Since other factors that typically constrain web participation might easily have contributed to our low participation rates and rather uneven patterns of participation, we cannot automatically attribute this pattern to the dangerous and transgressive topic of discussing homosexuality with children. However, a closer narrative analysis of the university discussion web, which generated the most extensive and extended discussion, yields some interesting tendencies. In the following section, we will highlight several discursive strategies that suggest *patterns* of silencing. While we do not know to what extent these arguments for silencing in the classroom might have contributed to web silencing, this closer look allows us to consider carefully how heteronormativity is constructed and maintained, giving us an insight into heterosexual matrix in action (Butler, 1999, p. 30). We will explore some of the strands within this matrix within the remainder of this paper.

## Children as asexual beings

Arguments used by some participants in our web discussion reflected the conviction that children have a particular sexual innocence and must be protected from the dangerous knowledge of homosexuality. For example:

> Can anyone reflect back on how naive and innocent you all were in primary school, even within Secondary school, how would you have coped, what ideas would you have formed knowing such information?

This evocation of an idealised sexually ignorant and vulnerable child tends to result in 'sanitized and idealized images of innocence and safety' in schools (Walkerdine, cited in Thorne, 1993, p. 136). However, research indicates that children experience sexual response in infancy, and engage in sexual play in early childhood, only learning to hide these behaviours as they become aware (between the ages of six and nine) of adults' cultural taboo (DeLamater & Friedrich, 2002).

This assumption of naiveté relates to the psychological argument that small children are not 'developmentally ready' to understand certain things. This notion that development is restricted by a child's step-wise progression through pre-programmed stages most commonly evokes Piagetian stages of child development (Piaget & Smith, 1995), and has been criticised as overly rigid, individualistic and culturally specific (Matusov & Hayes, 2000; LeVine & Comparative Education Research Centre, 2003; Rogoff, 2003). Lesko describes a tendency for her multicultural education students to argue that children are not yet at the developmental stage where they are prepared for abstract and critical thinking, using 'powerful, professionalized, psychologized discourse in arguing for the impracticality, even impossibility, of critical multicultural thinking' (Lesko, 1998, p. 268). In reality, primary school-aged children have demonstrated that, when asked, they are not only able, but also quite willing, to discuss critically issues relating to gay and lesbian rights (Chasnoff, 1996; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1998).

Thorne (1993), in her field work with primary school children, was struck by the 'physicality and sexuality' of the children (p. 136), as well as the teachers' relative discomfort with sexuality; adults were uneasy, for example, around girls who 'had their development' early (p. 139). Thorne's observations suggested that while children were aware and attentive of their own developing sexualities, and maintained stereotypes and misconceptions reflecting those prevalent in adult society, the adults' unwillingness to discuss or even acknowledge these issues with children constructed sex as a source of shame, anxiety and gender conflict.

## Fear of the 'gay agenda'

This assumption that children are 'innocent but socially susceptible' (Weems, 1999, p. 30) casts children as potential victims, and opens the possibility for children to be recruited to homosexuality, the so-called 'gay agenda.' Recently in Spain, where gay marriage is legal, a single photograph depicting a gay marriage was included in a series of photographs depicting heterosexual marriages aired on a popular children's programme on public television. The conservative government responded with accusations that 'State television is being used to send out, within its programming for children, messages that the Socialist party wants heard' (Tremlett, 2005), a statement clearly illustrating this notion that a mere passing mention of homosexuality is equivalent to an aggressive political agenda.

The gay agenda requires an impressionable victim with an incipient but fragile heterosexuality, who, upon receiving the forbidden awareness of sexual transgression, is drawn inexorably to its lure. The perpetrators advancing the agenda may not

necessarily intend to recruit, but the knowledge is dangerous enough to work without malicious intent:

> I know people say that you are either gay or you are not BUT … I have seen it become fashionable among young straight girls taken onto the gay scene. Girls that I believe would not have thought about it before.

Both the notion that homosexuality can be renounced and that heterosexuality can be tried on as a fashion implicitly assumes that sexual orientation is a personal choice:

> I agree that it is a feature of an individual as in their choice to be gay … which is why I do not agree that it should be in children's books.

The concern over the recruiting power of the homosexual agenda also implies that there is no heterosexual agenda. One poster argued that heterosexuals are more discrete about their sexuality:

> it is their choice to be this way and those of us who are not that way inclined should not have to hear all about their choices. straight couples do not go around shouting about their right to be gay etc so why should we have to listen to them.

Another argued that children do not learn about homosexuality in schools:

> Primary schools don't teach children that men should like women or vice versa so personally I wouldn't like the idea of introducing that or any other preference.

There is a perceived imbalance; the heterosexual majority is thought to be under-represented in schools. As an American lawyer expressed; 'If they're going to open it up to allow the homosexual agenda to be pushed in schools, then they have to allow the mainstream view to be expressed as well' (Hendrie, 2005).

This is a curious twist, since merely knowing about homosexuality is said to actively encourage homosexual behaviour, yet an overwhelming majority of encounters with heterosexuality is seen to have no effect, a logical inconsistency pointed out by one of our posters:

> If media could influence orientation the way some would claim then there would be no homosexuality—as we are surrounded by heterosexual ideals, therefore by their own argument, all homosexuals should have been 'converted' to heterosexuality at a very early age?

## The SEXualisation of homosexuality

Sears argues that we 'routinely equate sexual identities with sexual acts' (1999, p. 5), yet because of the heteronormative construction of heterosexuality as an unmarked category, it is homosexuality that is associated with sexual desire, as the excess and perversion that brackets the normal (Foucault, 1979). In this sense, transgressive sexualities are born of the assumption that normality is possible and that homosexuality is merely the deviant shadow of heterosexuality (Britzman, 1995). For lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, their deviance is always identified with excess. The mere act of making their sexuality visible makes it seems excessive:

> There seems no middle ground for 'Others' to inhabit: They are forced to choose between invisibility and *surplus visibility*, between silence and the accusation that they are making excessive noise. *Surplus visibility* reinforces the invisibility imposed on the marginalized by making it safer to go one's own way quietly, without calling attention to oneself. (Patai, 1992, pp. 35–36)

The affiliation of love with home and hearth, and of desire with undisciplined nature, helps to perpetuate the construction of the child as a naïve creature that must be protected from the dangers and perversities of the predatory wild untamed that exists beyond safe and desire-free civilisation. We found this implicit conflation between (homo)sexuality and sexual acts in the tendency of our participants to respond to comment 6, 'All teachers, pupils, and parents have a right to be open about their sexuality', as if we had specifically suggested that teachers share details of their sex lives with students:

> No, I don't think so, guess I'm a prude but I'd hate to be taught by a teacher who spoke about his or her sex life, that's private and should be left in the bedroom.

Similarly, comment 4, 'Children in school are too young to be thinking about things like sexual orientation', seems to have been interpreted as if we had substituted 'sexual activity' for 'sexuality':

> Let them have a childhood while they can and find out about sex when they are adult enough to cope with relationships.

These sexualised interpretations of our discussion prompts were challenged by several posters, who attempted to tease sexual orientation out from the automatic association with sexual activity:

> Being open does not mean you have to describe what you do.

## The mind/body split

As a lingering effect of Cartesian dualism, which assumes that the mind and body are separate and have separate realms of appropriate presence (hooks, 1994; Butler, 1999), those who physically inhabit the public spaces of schooling have been expected to leave their bodies outside the school doors. These bodies, while not acknowledged, constantly assert their indomitable presence in terms of physical ability, social class, ethnicity, gender, and sexual identity (Sparkes, 1996). As Kelly (1992) points out, schools are not sexually neutral public spaces, but spaces where sex is deeply woven into the relationships among students and teachers, including relationships of harassment and abuse. Schools are not only sites for learning academic subjects, but places where people are educated in the possibilities and limitations of sexual identities (Epstein & Johnson, 1998). Epstein *et al.* (2003) identify school as a heteronormative institution, where heterosexuality is constructed as natural and transgressive sexualities are either tacitly or actively silenced. In this context, physicality for homosexuals takes on an additional and dangerous meaning. As colour-blindness is based on the assumption that Whiteness is the norm (Howard, 1999), heteronormativity is predicated on an implicit assumption of

heterosexuality. Holding hands in public is an unmarked act for a heterosexual couple, but for a homosexual couple any simple act of affection is marked as a conscious and political statement, 'flaunting one's sexuality' (Sears, 1999, p. 4).

Thus the very presence of someone (including a teacher) who is thought to be gay or lesbian brings with it a sensation of danger: teachers who transgress sexual norms are seen as particularly dangerous, and are expected to keep their hyper-visible bodies outside. One of the contributors to our web forum describes this fear of gay bodies in the highly physical realm of physical education (PE):

> I remember how uncomfortable I was at age 12 years with just the rumours going around my school that one of my PE teachers (1980's) was a lesbian—a 'butch' looking woman who rode a motorbike —I know this is very stereotypical, but it seemed to add fuel to the fire! She took PE on alternate weeks and because we had to strip and shower in front of her, I cried and begged my mam to write me a note so I couldn't do PE.

## Policing the boundaries between public and private domains

Gay bodies, bristling with hyper-sexuality and hyper-visibility, are especially unwelcome. The public sphere, policed by the tacit agreement of civil discourse, is reserved only for certain bodies (Mayo, 2002). These perceptions serve to reinforce the boundaries between the public and private domains (Epstein, 1994) and the notion that crossing this divide—in this case from private to public—will contaminate those on the other side (Douglas, 1969), thus creating an urgent need to protect the boundaries of identity. One particularly surprising response to the web discussion, suggesting this sort of contamination, came from a participant who identified as an out gay man, and who was an outspoken advocate for gay recognition. Yet when it came to a discussion of whether teachers had a right to be open about their sexuality, his response was not only a resounding 'No', but also culminated in a surprisingly aggressive final statement, echoing the sexualisation of homosexuality discussed above:

> They have a right to be open about it but the subject should never need to be brought up in their professional life and that no teacher should ever really bring their private life into class past the normal boundaries of informality. Whether a teacher bums women, goats or men is hardly related to a child's education.

## The silence of political correctness

Some of the comments posted on the web forum appeared at first to be positive endorsements of a sexualities equality agenda, but closer scrutiny suggests that a more general advocacy of equality and recognition of diversity may actually have allowed participants not to engage at greater depth with the more difficult questions, which are eclipsed by what Britzman and Dippo call 'the question that shuts down the trouble' (2000, p. 32). By adopting the legitimised diversity discourses of the academy and, in the case of trainee teachers, of the Department for Education and Skills Standards for Qualified Teacher Status (Department for Education and Skills/

Teacher Training Agency, 2002), participants may have been able to avoid interrogating underlying currents of inequality that might not be solved by generalised equality statements. For example, one student invoked the neutralised discourse of 'diversity':

> Children need to understand all the diversity that is available to them without pushing a 'normal' and 'abnormal' view.

Implicit in this comment is the negation of inequality and the assumption that 'understanding' diversity can and should be achieved without questioning what diversity might mean for those who are diverse in less acceptable, or less normal, ways.

## Diversion and distraction: (other bigger) issues

In some cases, people brought arguments that shifted the focus away from the focus on homosexuality proposed by our 11 discussion-starting comments. The suggestion was that we should really be worrying about other, perhaps more pressing, issues. In some cases, these were accompanied by a direct assertion that homosexuality was not an appropriate topic to broach in schools:

> Children in school are too young to be thinking about things like sexual orientation. There's plenty of time after primary school to find out about life and what goes on in the world. And why on earth aren't kids taught about those a hell of a lot less fortunate than us in the UK?

In this case, the proposal is that we should direct our attention to other more appropriate and worthy concerns. Others did not directly claim that sexual orientation should not be addressed, but simply asserted that this was not a topic we should be concerned about. For example, in response to comment 1, 'There should be more children's books about gay and lesbian families', one poster simply expressed disinterest:

> Not entirely convinced this is the world's biggest dilemma

It may be argued, however, that disinterest can be even more threatening than outrage, since heteronormativity is policed through a curious combination of invisibility and hyper-visibility. As long as the Other is not mentioned and similarly agrees to not make any waves, the problem disappears and, indeed, is expected to do so. In some cases, participants, perhaps even unconsciously, converted our discussion topics into issues that they saw as more interesting by diverting the discussion. As illustrated earlier, several posters converted discussions about sexuality to conversations about teenage pregnancy, and the need for (or dangers of) sex education. Take, for example, these two separate postings in response to comment 4, 'Children in school are too young to be thinking about things like sexual orientation':

> too right, although sex education is a must as there are too many teenage mothers out there!!!!!

> Children are being forced by society to grow up too soon. It's no wonder we have so many teenage mothers.

In reality, the only sexual orientation that tends to lead to teenaged pregnancy is *hetero*sexuality, demonstrating the strength of the heteronormative assumption even when using a term like 'sexual orientation' that so strongly evokes the Other.

There was also fairly extended discussion around the topic of bullying inspired by comment 10, 'A boy is being picked on by classmates who are calling him 'poofter', 'faggot' etc.'. There were 11 responses to this comment, a fairly high number, and many were unusually long and detailed. We noticed, however, a tendency to digress from the issue of the gay-specific scenario proposed in the comment to more general issues of bullying, and in some cases beyond. For example, the following quote begins with a comment about bullying in general (never once mentioning its possible relation to sexual orientation), then moves through a discussion of caning and school uniforms:

> Bullying is not being tackled at all, by my way of thinking from any Government body. I think it is pathetic really, that considering we are the 4th economic super power that we allow this to go on. Myself I say bring the cane back, I remember when 13 /14 that they were abolishing the cane, we all went mental, because we thought we could take the hit and miss out of the teachers. Trust me it didn't work. School uniforms are an issue as well, pray tell why they have to abolish it, it's stupid …

The posting ends by relating the recent gang murder of a young girl, not (apparently) related to gay-bashing:

> … I was reading the newspaper today. Girl 12 got killed by a brain haemorrhage after being attacked by a gang of 13-14 year olds. A girl 13 has been arrested for murder.

This sort of distraction and diversion does not result in web silence; in fact, the discussion of bullying and crime and school-based punishment was long and in some places impassioned. So much is being said that it is hard to notice the very thing that is not being said. Furthermore, in choosing what to address and not address in the discussion, a strong message is sent concerning what is and is not worthy of attention.

## Projected concerns: consequences of 'incivility'

Participants often brought up the anticipated negative consequences of breaching the civil code of silence around gay issues. While they explicitly suggest that others (teachers, parents, peers) will exert the silencing pressure, the possibility exists that posters may to some extent be projecting some of their own personal insecurities and doubts onto others. Nevertheless, whether predicted or displaced, these concerns can serve to maintain a sort of tacit agreement to avoid 'speaking the unpleasant' (Chávez & O'Donnell, 1998).

The imagined consequences most often came from parents:

> you would be naive to consider that teachers training in the art of sexual orientation would bode well with a parent, can you imagine the parent evening discussions!

It was interesting, however, that parents were assumed to be straight and unsupportive of homosexual rights. Nobody suggested that parents might complain at the lack of representation of homosexuality in the curriculum, nor suggested that parents might actively support efforts to incorporate such representations (although some argued that representation would be a positive step for children of homosexual parents).

The (presumably heterosexual) children themselves were also invoked as a force of resistance:

> As a primary trainee I don't feel that discussing sexual orientation with younger children would achieve any desired effect. The fact that the subject is 'funny' to children would take over any discussion.

And while some argued that homosexual children might feel affirmed by seeing their sexual orientation reflected in the curriculum and in openly gay teachers, others argued that bringing up the topic might be especially damaging exactly to those it was meant to support:

> I think only those with a deathwish could be open about being gay. That is teachers/pupils and I imagine those with gay parents would prefer it wasn't common knowledge.

## Conclusion: from surplus visibility to normalisation?

Overall, analysis of these web discussions suggests that silence operates in a range of ways, both at and below the surface of discourse, to police the boundaries of heterosexuality and maintain the heterosexual matrix in action. Yet several people did indeed question this heteronormativity on our web forum, suggesting that in fact visibility and representation would be important first steps in feeling comfortable as members of gay families and as gay individuals:

> For this to be seen by children of heterosexual families as part of family culture, would also enable him and his family to feel less invisible.

> 10% of the population are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender—why should we not be represented like the other 90%? As I've said in my other posts, I long for the day where sexuality is a non-issue. We are all humans after all.

Others questioned the normality implicit in heterosexuality:

> So then shouldn't the question become: why is 'normality' defined by the close minded majority?

> A family is a family. Saying that a family can only consist of a mummy and a daddy and little Jimmy and Jessica is like saying that a meal can only consist of a starter, main course and dessert.

> They certainly SHOULD be a perfectly normal part of everyday society. However, if it really were the case, we wouldn't be discussing the topic here would we?

These assertions bring to light the potential that breaking the silence has, not only for those whose voices are not heard, but also for those who have not yet been able to listen.

## Notes

1. Throughout the paper, we have endeavoured to keep posters' writing as close to the original as possible. In some cases they have been slightly edited for clarity.
2. For a more detailed analysis of researcher participation and of the complexities of the discursive construction of the web forum, see Atkinson and Hayes (2005).

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