## Intercultural Education

## Homophobia, transphobia and culture: deconstructing heteronormativity in English primary schools

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# Homophobia, transphobia and culture: deconstructing heteronormativity in English primary schools

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This article presents some of the advances in legal support for addressing homophobia and transphobia in school settings and provides a critique of school-based policies that focus on these phenomena as particular incidents involving bullies and victims. Defining heteronormativity as a cultural phenomenon underpinning recognisable acts of aggression, the authors describe some of the chief factors that seem to inhibit teachers from addressing sexuality and gender in primary schools. Drawing primarily on data from the No Outsiders project, where primary teachers throughout the UK have collaborated to promote lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) equalities in their schools and classrooms, the authors argue that heteronormativity should be addressed by purposefully promoting the equality of LGBT people as part of a broader whole school ethos that celebrates diversity and challenges inequities of all kinds.

**Keywords:** heteronormativity; transphobia; homophobia; sexualities equality; primary schools

## Introduction

Navanethem Pillay, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, has declared that 'Those who are lesbian, gay or bisexual, those who are transgender, transsexual or intersex, are full and equal members of the human family, and are entitled to be treated as such' (ILGA 2008). The single anti-discrimination directive proposed on 2 July 2008 by the European Commission may help to make Pillay's vision a reality, at least in European Union member countries, by offering protection against discrimination based on sexual orientation to the same extent as discrimination based on age, disability and religion (ILGA-Europe 2008). While it is vitally important that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people are legally protected, it is also vital that education play a major role in transforming deep-seated prejudices, both at personal and institutional levels.

The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Queer Youth and Student Organisation has identified education as a particularly important arena for advancing equality and human rights for LGBTQ young people (*Pink News* 2007). In the UK, LGBT equality still remains largely unaddressed in schools, despite the fact that this pressing human rights issue is officially recognized by the Department for Children,

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Schools and Families (DCSF), the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) and the General Teaching Council for England (GTC). Two recent government publications, *Guidance for schools on preventing and responding to sexist, sexual and transphobic bullying* (DCSF 2009) and *Transphobic bullying: Could you deal with it in your school?* (GIRES 2008) show that the problem, at least as understood in terms of homophobic and transphobic bullying, is being taken seriously.

As important as this recognition is, it still reflects a shallow understanding of the social processes underpinning these phenomena and the subtle ways in which schools are complicit in sustaining them, even from the very earliest years. When school-based homophobia is described in popular media or school-based policy (transphobia is rarely recognized at all), it is most often in the context of secondary school or post-secondary school. Nevertheless, the authors argue that both homophobia and transphobia are cultural phenomena and can only be addressed by purposefully promoting the equality of LGBT people as part of a broader whole school ethos which celebrates diversity and challenges inequities of all kinds. In short, the institutional culture of school must be transformed as a whole, and this must begin at the beginning, as soon as children first walk through the school gate.

This paper defines heteronormativity as a cultural phenomenon underpinning recognizable acts of homophobia and transphobia, and describes some of the chief factors that seem to inhibit teachers from addressing sexuality and gender in primary schools. Finally, it describes the 'No Outsiders' project, whereby primary teachers throughout the UK have collaborated to promote LGBT equality in their schools and classrooms.

## Heteronormativity as a cultural process

Homophobia tends to be represented in the popular media in terms of homophobic bullying, focusing on isolated acts committed by certain types of people (bullies) against others (victims). Drawing upon their own research over the past four years in the UK, as well as the research of others, the authors understand homophobia as the systemic and purposeful social policing of hegemonic masculinity. Because the authors have focused on the primary level, where gender presentation and gendered preferences tend to be interpreted as markers of (emergent) sexuality (DePalma and Atkinson 2007), the focus here is on the ways in which normative (hetero)sexuality is policed in primary school settings. It should be noted, however, that misogyny, cissexism and genderism are also strongly in play here, and call for separate scrutiny which is beyond the scope of this paper.

Knutagard's (2005) research in Sweden found that violence against perceived homosexuals is enacted as a means of gender construction and is simultaneously a developmental, communicative and social act. Recalling Crawford's (1993) understanding of gender as a verb rather than a noun, and Butler's (1999) description of the performativity of gender and sexuality, the authors argue that gender and sexuality are purposefully enacted rather than passively experienced. These performances are public and communicative, and can serve to reinforce inequalities around socially mediated understandings of desirability and power. This implies that reducing homophobic abuse is more likely to occur through systematic and proactive social change than through simply preventing or reducing particular acts of violence.

It is also important to keep in mind that homophobic abuse is not limited to people who identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual, or even to those who consider themselves to be gender variant. As a means of enforcing heteronormativity, homophobia affects

everyone, regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity. In April 2005, for example, British Columbia's highest court overturned a lower court ruling that Azmi Jubran could not sue a school board for homophobic bullying and harassment because he was straight (GALE 2008). This is an important legal precedent which recognizes the universal scope of heteronormativity, a particularly important step for those working in primary schools, where there is a widespread assumption that homophobia is not relevant for primary school children, based on the assumption that they are not yet aware of their sexuality.

A needs assessment commissioned in the UK by the National Healthy Schools Programme into the views of school staff, pupils aged 7–18 and LGB young people revealed a pattern of habitual and purposeful homophobic abuse coupled with ambivalent school response in primary as well as secondary schools.

- The predominance of name-calling and the use of 'gay' as a term of abuse in primary schools were not seen as homophobic. Pupils felt that teachers did not consider these incidents to be significant (since they did not challenge them) and this was thought to be acceptable. Teachers confirmed that pupils (mainly boys) commonly used homophobic language.

  > It's mainly done jokey if you dislike people – everyone gets called gay at times. (Primary pupil)
  > They wouldn't say it if you were [actually] gay. They probably wouldn't even talk to you. (Primary pupil)

- Pupils felt that classmates with LGB parents would themselves become the target of homophobia.[1]

These examples are supported by a recent UK study which found that 75% of primary teachers report hearing the phrases 'you're so gay' or 'that's so gay' and that 44% report hearing words like 'poof', 'dyke', 'queer' and 'faggot'. As one primary teacher interviewed put it, 'At primary level to call another child gay is currently a term of abuse' (Stonewall 2009, 11).

Nevertheless, in a recent controversial statement, responding to Radio 1 broadcaster Chris Moyles' description of a telephone ring tone as 'gay', the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Board of Governors asserted that 'The word "gay" now means "rubbish" in modern playground-speak and need not be offensive to homosexuals' (Sherwin 2006). This statement implies that children have ceased to understand the word as an insult that might be offensive to people as well as telephones and other inanimate objects. There have been attempts to recuperate these meanings into something positive, or at least not homophobic. A newspaper article defining regional slang expressions asserted that only the spelling need be changed, 'Gey: adjective – "your music's gey", meaning pathetic, inadequate. Not homosexual, but descended from "gay"' (Lowrison 2006). More recently, hip-hop icon Kanye West has simply declared that from now on gay is to be understood as a compliment rather than an insult, albeit still narrowly focused on the legendary gay (male) fashion sense:

> Take the word gay. Like, in hip-hop, that's a negative thing, right? But in the past two, three years, all the gay people I've encountered have been, like, really, really, extremely dope. I haven't gone to a gay bar, nor do I ever plan to. But where I would talk to a gay person, the conversation would be mostly around art or design, it'd be really dope. From a design standpoint, kids'll say, 'Dude, those pants are gay'. (Charman 2008)

Despite these, at best, over-optimistic assertions, the negative impact of using 'gay' as an insult relies on deep-seated cultural understandings that are not so easily dismissed, at least in the short run. What the BBC Board of Governors' response failed to address is that children with lesbian or gay parents, family members or friends, and children who themselves may eventually come to identify as gay, are constantly barraged by the message that 'gay' is synonymous with ineptitude, undesirability and isolation. The National Union of Teachers reports that children as young as three are using homophobic language, and that teachers need to learn how to affirm gay and lesbian relationships (Legg 2006).

ChildLine, a child protection helpline, reports that 60% of the young people who called to talk about sexual orientation, homophobia or homophobic bullying were 12 to 15, and 6% were 11 or under. Their report includes quotes from an 11-year-old boy who declared that he was happy to be gay, despite tormentors kicking him and calling him 'batty boy', a 10-year-old boy who was being called 'poo-boy', an 11-year-old girl who was afraid to report to her teacher that she was being called 'dyke' and 'lemon', a 10-year-old boy who reported that children were kicking him and calling him 'poofter' on the playground, but teachers did not believe him, and an 11-year-old girl whose teacher suggested she just keep away from the children who were calling her a 'fat lesbian' (NSPCC 2006). These incidents reveal not only the range of homophobic abuse experienced by primary-school-aged children, but also the eerily unresponsive culture of the school. These children are not describing isolated events which evoke an immediate and clear response from the school. Furthermore, teachers' uncertainty of how or even whether to respond reproduces rather than challenges homophobia.

It is oversimplistic to assume that the use of these homophobic taunts, even among young children, is divorced from the sexual and gender connotations they carry. In the ChildLine examples, these children seemed all too painfully aware that these terms called into question not only their sexuality, but also their femininity or masculinity. In popular culture, sexual orientation is related to particular gender-associated behaviours, and transgendered people are often associated with homosexuality and exaggerated masculinities and femininities, regardless of the diverse lived experiences of LGBT people. Butler (1999) refers to the heterosexual matrix of sex–gender–sexuality, which defines certain (oppressed, silenced, marginalized) sexual and gendered ways of being against a network of intersecting normative ways of performing sexuality and gender.

Heteronormativity, the 'organizational structures in schools that support heterosexuality as normal and anything else as deviant' (Donelson and Rogers 2004, 128), draws upon misogyny and gender stereotypes as normalizing discourses (Fairclough 1988). Heteronormativity legitimizes homophobia by implying, for example, that 'boys who show their feelings or who are too intimate with other boys are either "girls" or "poofs". Equally, girls who are deemed to be too tomboyish run the risk of being called "dykes" or "lesbians"' (Forrest 2006, 119). As Nixon and Givens argue, 'the boundaries of both gender and sexuality are policed by the troops of hegemonic masculinity' (2004, 228). Given the relatively low social status of women, for example, the term 'gay' purposefully evokes and reinforces essentialized notions of masculinity and femininity. 'The use of the term to denote a lack of desirable masculine attributes forms a bridge between homophobia and misogyny' (Duncan 2004, 3). Homophobic and misogynistic discourses are deployed consciously to maintain existing power relations and depend on an implicit consensus, 'A consensus that rests on authoritative and officially sanctioned truth always silences alternative truths, marginalizes diversity and reduces it to abnormality' (MacNaughton 2005, 37).

This understanding of homophobia and heteronormativity as purposeful hegemonic cultural forces, enacted through discourses that range from violence to silence, calls for a policy of proactive cultural change in primary schools. Such a change requires an interrogation of the assumptions underpinning heteronormativity, not only in terms of what is said and done, but also in terms of what is left out of the official discourse.

## What stops teachers from addressing sexualities equality in the primary school?

DePalma and Atkinson's (2009) interviews with lesbian, gay and straight primary teachers and teacher-trainees points to a widespread underestimation of the prevalence and significance of homophobia in schools. This seems to be due partly to the relative invisibility of LGBT teachers and parents. For example, out of 20 gay and lesbian teachers in the sample of 72 practising and trainee teachers, only one gay man had come out to his pupils. While most teachers interviewed cited fear of reprisals from parents if they addressed LGBT equality in the classroom, not a single teacher suggested that LGBT parents (or, indeed, any parents) might wish them to do so. Only a handful of gay and lesbian parents were identified by teachers, and these were often characterized as reticent to be openly identified within the broader school community.

There also seems to be particular reluctance among teachers to address sexualities equality in the primary years, where an implicit conceptual link between sexual *orientation* and sexual *activity* has led teachers to avoid addressing same-sex relationships within, for example, discussions of family, friendship, self or growing up, despite the fact that many children in their care will have at least some connection, through family or friends, to non-heterosexual relationships, and at least some are likely to identify in later life as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered. Sears (1999) has pointed out the tendency to associate sexual identity automatically with sexual acts, a tendency which is borne out by the authors' own experiences working in English primary schools.

This hyper-sexualization of gay and lesbian sexualities clashes strongly with the widespread myth in primary schools of the asexual and naive child. One contributor to an online discussion board in the authors' research, for example, evokes a simpler time from her/his childhood, when knowledge of the existence of (hyper-sexualized) gay and lesbian people would have been dangerous information:

> 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? (see DePalma and Atkinson 2006 for further analysis of this discussion)

However, these popular (adult) assumptions about the sexual ignorance of children have been challenged by research, including some primary classroom ethnographies which have explored the ways in which children's awareness of sexuality interacts with adults' discomfort and denial of it (Blaise 2005; Renold 2005). In a recent UK study, young lesbians reported that the age at which they first knew of their sexuality ranged from 6 to 12 years, and that the average gap between young women realizing they were lesbians and first telling someone about it was three years (YWCA England and Wales 2006). These data suggest that some will be aware of gay and lesbian identities long before secondary school. Perhaps even more striking is the three-year gap between self-realization and disclosure, a long silence during which the pervasive heteronormativity of primary and/or secondary schools is relentlessly at work.

Primary teachers also cite fundamentalist religious groups as a strong inhibiting factor, describing fears of invoking retributions from committed Christians and a concern with offending fundamental Muslims, who are themselves minorities in British society (DePalma and Atkinson 2009). While other equalities issues, such as 'race' and disability, continue to struggle with societal responses ranging from prejudice and majority outrage to apathy, LGBT equality is unique in being perceived by some as against someone's religion. It is important to realise, however, that this distinction begins to break down when one considers certain religious arguments for oppression, such as slavery in the US (Haynes 2002) and the persecution of Jews in Europe (Dawidowicz 1975). This is not to dismiss religious concerns, but to suggest that it may be necessary to negotiate the boundaries where respecting one group's freedoms might mean limiting the freedoms of another (Okin et al. 1999).

It is useful to remember that, while homosexuality is sometimes referred to as a 'lifestyle', it is actually a fundamental aspect of personal identity. While teachers may be tempted to avoid the issue, especially in the light of pressures from some religious groups to consider LGBT identities as unfortunate choices which can be changed or at least concealed, the reality is that freedom of sexuality is protected by law in much the same way as 'race', gender and disability (at least in the UK). In a documentary film about addressing lesbian and gay equalities in American elementary schools (Chasnoff 1996), one elementary school principal explains that she tells fundamentalist Christian parents that if they want her to defend their right to religious freedom, they must allow her to promote lesbian and gay equality in her school. The day-to-day reality is certainly more complex, as teachers and parents negotiate on a case-by-case basis this intersection of religious freedom and LGBT rights, but this principal has taken the important step of publicly recognizing sexuality as a legitimate social justice issue.

Of course, there is a great deal of diversity within religious groups.[2] Despite the fact that the most extreme rightwing views seem to be heard the loudest, there are other religious discourses of love and acceptance which support LGBT equality. Michael Apple (2006) asks: 'How can we bring religious discourse away from the right to become allies rather than have disdain for religion?' Teachers might lose sight of the potential for religious allies. One gay primary teacher in DePalma and Atkinson's (2009) study, for example, was shocked when his committed Christian Head told him about gay Christian groups, and another was pleasantly surprised that Muslim parents on his Board of Governors supported him in coming out to his pupils.

It is completely understandable that teachers have essentialist understandings of religious tenets, particularly because simplistic views are circulated by the media and cast as representative. Extremist comments make better sound bites than carefully considered and complex viewpoints. Moreover, people may strategically and even perhaps unconsciously draw upon religion to justify prejudice and render it unassailable. When the law protects people's right to sexuality and gender expression as well as religious freedom, then one can engage in meaningful dialogue about how this might play out in practice.

## 'No Outsiders': researching approaches to sexualities equality in primary schools

> Everyone is an insider, there are no outsiders – whatever their beliefs, whatever their colour, gender or sexuality. (Archbishop Desmond Tutu, 25 February 2004)

'No Outsiders' was a collaborative action research project that brought academics and practitioners together as co-researchers, enabling teachers to implement and evaluate strategies to address sexualities equality in their schools in a collaborative practitioner-research community. Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and led by Principal Investigator Elizabeth Atkinson at the University of Sunderland, the project was designed to involve 15 teachers[3] in schools spread throughout the UK in conducting action research projects in their own schools during each project year (2006–07 and 2007–08). The approaches and techniques varied, but the overall project objective was to explore strategies to address LGBT equality in primary schools.

Within the broad paradigm of action research, the authors chose a Participatory Action Research perspective, which derives particular benefits from collaboration within and across research communities. The school-based practitioners were supported throughout the project by three regional research assistants who were each based at one of three collaborating universities: the University of Sunderland, the University of Exeter and the Institute of Education, University of London. Linked by regional and national meetings, as well as an interactive project website, members of the research team formed a global action research community (Somekh 2005) to investigate local practices, with the goal of informing policy and broader practice. Emphasizing that all culture can be understood as a set of tools, Somekh (2005, 4) proposes that 'New cultural tools themselves emerge as the objects/products of visionary activity, and can be created purposefully to enable and transform activity'.

Together, school-based and university-based 'No Outsiders' researchers set out to interrogate the processes of gender normalization and heteronormativity inherent in their own practice and to explore possibilities for new types of practice. While space prohibits a description of the full range of activities and approaches explored by the teachers in the course of the project, let alone the thinking, reflective and analytical processes that have accompanied them, a series of snapshots of project work across its varied sites have been selected.

### Case 1: Judy[4]

Judy is a year 1 teacher. Her school had never considered addressing sexualities before, and neither had she, but she began her 'No Outsiders' work by exploring some of the subtle ways in which heteronormativity operated in her school. In an early field note, for example, Judy reflected on her decision to chide a child for using the word 'crap', but not for using the word 'gay' as an insult at the same time. This heightened awareness of the ways in which heteronormativity operates through silence and omission formed the basis for her 'No Outsiders' work.

During her first year in the project, Judy worked to prepare the school for work that was seen by the administration as risky, particularly in terms of potential parent resistance. Judy spent the first year of the project rewriting guidance and addressing staff, governor and parent concerns. During the second year of the project, Judy encouraged staff to begin using project storybooks in their own classrooms, and she organized a series of assemblies for Key Stage 1 that used project books to explore same-sex families and gender identity. She has investigated ways in which the proactive incorporation of LGBT-inclusive stories has gradually contributed to a shift in school ethos, so that now when a child makes a homophobic comment teachers make explicit connections to these books in discussing the implications of the comment rather than simply chastising or punishing the child for inappropriate language.

### Case 2: Jade

Jade works in a private child care centre for children from birth to 8 years. The only 'No Outsiders' practitioner-researcher to work with preschool-aged children, Jade entered the project at the beginning of the second year. Her agency director attended a 'No Outsiders' presentation during the first year and immediately purchased a full set of project books to stock their newly opened site, where Jade is the manager.

Jade's primary interest is to investigate ways in which very young children can develop positive and inclusive attitudes about gender diversity and sexuality before they start to take up stereotypical and normative attitudes. To this end, she has been including stories with non-gender conforming characters and same-sex headed families into the daily routine of the centre, and specifically within its nursery, as well as carefully avoiding normative language and practices. She makes sure that staff are careful not to project their own heteronormative assumptions onto children (for example, that girls will eventually have boyfriends and husbands, or that girls and boys who put on dresses during pretend play are 'pretty'). In addition, Jade has been exploring ways to communicate and explain these inclusive practices and resources to parents. She has proactively introduced her project aims and methodology to each parent as they consider placing their child at the nursery, which has occasionally led to decisions to find other placements, but has more often resulted in heightened understandings and appreciation for the value of proactive gender and sexuality work with young children.

### Case 3: Nikki and Zoë

Zoë is the deputy head and Nikki is the Inclusion Manager at a Church of England school which serves a high proportion of black and minority ethnic families, many of whom come from Muslim backgrounds. They have investigated how to incorporate sexualities equality into their already highly diverse and inclusive school. In this environment, where strong and trusting relations with parents across diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds have already been established and where a school-wide push for disabilities equality has recently been successful, Nikki and Zoë set out to expand the school's inclusion policy and practice to embrace sexualities equality as well.

Their focus has been on how to be fully inclusive without further marginalizing groups who might express discomfort with sexuality and gender diversity for cultural–religious reasons. To this end, they introduced the planned 'No Outsiders' work at a school governors' meeting, held a parents' meeting to explain the work, and finally proceeded to incorporate project storybooks into classroom activities according to lesson plans which they had written to accompany them. Unfortunately, some parent resistance was organized after they had nearly finished the work, and the Local Authority required the school to stop work for a 'cooling off period', and then passed the responsibility to school governors to decide how to proceed without direct Local Authority support. In this difficult context, Zoë and Nikki reached beyond the school to participate in consultations with faith and LGB community groups. This has provided insights into ways in which different equalities strands might be perceived to be in conflict and how coalition building might be possible across minoritized communities. The school has recently been awarded the highest possible grade of Outstanding (top grade) by Ofsted for its work in community cohesion.

### Case 4: Jo, Nichola, Katie and Karen

Jo is head teacher, Nichola teaches year 1 and is head of Key Stage 1, Katie teaches year 6 and is head of upper Key Stage 2, and Karen teaches year 4 in a school situated on the outskirts of a large city. With three project teachers spread throughout the year groups, LGBT equalities have been actively addressed across the school. The school started the 'No Outsiders' work with a diversity training day for all teaching and non-teaching staff. Teachers in the school committed to read at least one project book to pupils over the following half-term and then decide how to incorporate one or more of the books into their curriculum planning.

In July 2008, the school celebrated an arts-based diversity week which included gender and sexuality as well as religion, race/ethnicity, age and disability. As part of the week's activities, the project diversity trainer worked with year 1 pupils on gender stereotyping. A young performance poet was invited to share his poems about being black, gay and proud with year 4 pupils as part of a unit on inclusion, exclusion and gay identity. A gender educator openly discussed his own trans experience with year 6 children during a workshop on gender identity, gender variance and transgender experience, which led to a discussion focusing on the social ramifications of gender reassignment (in terms of friends, family and social acceptance). As head teacher, Jo has been committed to making sure that 'No Outsiders' work is firmly situated within the school's overall strong focus on diversity and equality. She has ensured that sexual orientation is included in their community cohesion and equality scheme and mapped the issue of gender and sexual orientation across their entire curriculum.

### Heteronormativity: taking a closer look at how one creates and maintains 'normal'

These cases are not meant to be a representative sample of 'No Outsiders' work, but they do provide an idea of the diversity and local specificity of the approaches taken. Other approaches have included producing an opera and a play based on project books, addressing children in the character of a lesbian Cinderella as part of an alternative fairy tales unit, redesigning oppressive symbols used in the Holocaust as part of an art project, designing worksheets with non-gender-conforming stick figures as part of a maths lesson, writing letters to characters in project books and, of course, simply including a range of books depicting lesbian, gay and gender variant characters in the range of books read and discussed in classrooms and assemblies. The teachers' experiences and reflections have been collected in a book recently published by Trentham Books (*The No Outsiders research team,* 2010).

Several teachers who identify as lesbian or gay have chosen to use their own identities and experiences as part of their project work, and this has proved to be particularly valuable in directly confronting prejudices. Some of this work is explored in more detail elsewhere (Allan et al. 2008; Atkinson and DePalma 2009). Nevertheless, the authors have consciously chosen to include here only practitioners who did not themselves identify as sexual minorities to help dispel the myth that there is nothing that straight teachers can offer. In DePalma and Atkinson's preliminary research, gay and lesbian interviewees tended to say that it would be particularly difficult for them to addresses LGBT issues in the classroom, since they would be seen as advancing a personal agenda, while straight interviewees worried that they were not well-enough informed to take on this work (DePalma and Atkinson 2009). While it is agreed that LGBT teachers who have the courage to come out in their schools can be a great asset

(Jackson 2007), the authors do not believe that these already marginalized teachers should be expected to shoulder this responsibility alone. After all, white teachers are expected to collaborate in anti-racist pedagogy. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu has argued, 'We overcame apartheid. We will overcome homophobia' (Tutu 2007). The authors believe that, like the struggle against racism, this 'we' needs to reach across race, across class, and across gender and sexuality.

Katie Ivens of the Campaign for Real Education, in a recent interview with BBC News, asserted that 'Children … do need to be given a concept of what is a normal family … there is such a thing as a normal family' (*Inside out* 2008). The concept of 'normal' erases the processes by which the normal is constructed: who gets left out when one draws a circle around a particular group of insiders? In the English context, one already knows that same-sex parents are left out, but who else joins them on the outside? Are immigrant families, inter-racial couples, children raised by grandparents or single parents and the homeless included in this elite group of normal insiders? This is not to say that anything goes, but once one starts taking for granted what is normal (and not surprisingly, 'normal' tends to reflect social hegemony rather than statistical variation), one forgets how these decisions are made, by whom and in whose interest.

It is hoped that the 'No Outsiders' project will contribute in some small way to initiating a culture shift in the project schools. Little by little, beginning in a few classrooms around the country, teachers are beginning to interrogate the norm so that institutional homophobia and transphobia are no longer an automatic part of the primary school landscape. It is hoped that these small islands of change will eventually join up with other small islands of change, and that these will inspire others, so that eventually homophobia and transphobia themselves become aberrations rather than part of the accepted norm.

## Notes

An earlier version of this paper was published in Lutz van Dijk and Barry van Driel. 2007. *Challenging homophobia: Teaching about sexual diversity*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.

1. These results were not published, but the investigation was undertaken to contribute to *Stand up for us* (Department for Education and Skills and Department of Health 2004).
2. For a database of essays which describe policies, beliefs and practices of various faith groups about homosexuality, see http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_chur.htm.
3. The project started with 15 practitioners, but a few colleagues and an entire new project site joined over the course of the project. Most practitioners were teachers and/or school managers, but one was an adviser for PSHCE at the local authority level, and one teacher took up a teacher-training post during the project. One site was a nursery, serving children 0–5 years of age.
4. Since these practitioners are co-researchers, they are referred to by their real names, with their permission.

## Notes on contributors

Renée DePalma was Senior Researcher on the 'No Outsiders' project (2006–2008) and is currently a Research Fellow at the University of Vigo, Spain. Her research and teaching over the years has focused on equalities and social justice in terms of race, ethnicity, language, sexuality and gender. She is mainly interested in the social construction of marginalization within and beyond schools, ways in which success and failure are co-constructed in institutional settings, and the design of counter-hegemonic institutional contexts and classroom practices.

Mark Jennett is a trainer and writer specializing in work with schools, local authorities and others around equalities, sexual orientation, gender, emotional intelligence and bullying. He is the principal author of 'Stand up for Us', a resource which offers support and guidance to UK schools on how to take a whole-school approach to addressing homophobia, and he edited 'Out In School', a resource for secondary school teachers on sexual orientation, gender and homophobia. He was the diversity trainer for the 'No Outsiders' project (2006–2008) and is currently working with Tacade to support schools in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland to develop proactive responses to homophobia.

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