

Inclusive relationships, sex and health education: Why the moral panic?

Catherine Lee 

Anglia Ruskin University, Chelmsford, UK

Management in Education
1–6
© 2021 British Educational Leadership,
Management & Administration Society
(BELMAS)



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/08920206211016453
journals.sagepub.com/home/mie



Abstract

There are an estimated 50,000 LGBT teachers in English schools. In common with all workplaces, under the Equality Act 2010, schools have a responsibility to protect Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) teachers from harassment in the workplace. From September 2020, for the first time, schools in England have been required to teach Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) that is inclusive of LGBT relationships. Representatives of faith communities and parents of school children in Birmingham and other major cities have protested outside school gates in opposition to the introduction of LGBT inclusive RSHE. This article explores what is at the heart of the moral panic about the inclusion of LGBT identities in the curriculum. As schools introduce inclusive RSHE, we must consider the impact of protests on LGBT teacher health, well-being and identity. More than half of LGBT teachers have suffered from anxiety or depression linked to their sexual identity and role as a teacher and so supportive and unequivocal support and intervention is needed to ensure schools are safe places, free from hostility, for LGBT teachers, pupils and their families.

Keywords

equality, health and well-being, heteronormativity, homophobia, LGBT, RSHE, school, sex education, teachers

From September 2020, schools in England were required to teach Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) that includes reference to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) relationships. Provision in primary and secondary schools differs with primary age children learning about Relationships Education, all secondary schools students in England learning about both Relationships and Sex Education, and schools in all phases in England required to teach Health Education. The Department for Education (DfE) recommends that primary schools deliver Sex Education as well, although this is not a requirement.

Schools in England must have an up-to-date policy for teaching Relationships Education/Relationships and Sex Education which is readily available for parents and carers to see. In order to cover the new inclusive content, the DfE guidance states that schools should teach about different families, which ‘can include for example, single parent families, LGBT parents, families headed by grandparents’ etc. For secondary schools, the guidance states that ‘sexual orientation and gender identity should be explored at a timely point’ and that ‘there should be an equal opportunity to explore the features of stable and healthy same-sex relationships’ which ‘should be integrated appropriately into the RSHE programme, rather than addressed separately or in only one lesson’. Allied to this, schools must at all times, comply with the provision of the Equality Act 2010 under which sexual orientation and gender reassignment are described as protected characteristics.

RSHE replaces Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) which had not been revisited since it was introduced in

2000. It is of note that in the new guidance, relationships takes precedence over sex in the title and the DfE have been at pains to stress that the new guidance does not sanction the teaching about homosexual acts but simply that ‘teaching should reflect the law . . . as it applies to relationships’.

Many have seen the new RSHE guidance as positive. Ringrose et. al. (2012) was critical of SRE which focused heavily on the prevention of sex, of risk and in particular, risks of diseases, teen-age pregnancy and protection against poor personal sexual choices. Epstein and Johnson (1998) too, was critical of SRE, for being entirely centred on heterosexual penetrative sex yet simultaneously positioning it as risky and to be appropriately delayed. The new guidance with its emphasis on healthy relationships rather than prevention and risks associated with the sexual act should then prepare young people more effectively for relationships and life in a diverse society. Inclusive RSHE aims to teach children and young people how, when and where to ask for help, and aims to create schools that are supportive and safe environment for all children, young people and adults regardless of their sexual or gender identity.

In Birmingham, Manchester, Northamptonshire and Kent, parents and faith groups have protested about the new regulations for teaching RSHE (which were passed by the Commons on 27.03.19). Parental protests were seen for a

Corresponding author:

Catherine Lee, Anglia Ruskin University, Bishops Hall Lane, Chelmsford CM1 1SQ, UK.

E-mail: catherine.lee@anglia.ac.uk

number of months outside Parkfield School in Birmingham. This began as a demonstration in opposition to an Out Gay male senior teacher's efforts to teach about equality and diversity more broadly through primary school story books, some of which featured LGBT characters. No Outsiders, uses story books to explore difference and expose children to depictions of family that reflect a diverse society. The aim of the No Outsiders project is to help all children and young people grow up with respectful and positive attitudes towards people who are different to them. No Outsiders also aims to proactively tackle the prejudice based bullying that is apparent in some schools in the UK.

The angry response to the new RSHE and No Outsiders by parents and local communities in Birmingham and across the UK created moral panic that left some pupils distressed and their teachers needing counselling. Such was the distress caused that Anderton Park school went to court to apply for an exclusion zone to be placed around their school, prohibiting the parents and faith group representatives from continuing to gather at the school gates to intimidate those arriving at and leaving the school.

In October 2019, the UK Government's Department for Education (DfE) issued guidance for local authorities and Headteachers entitled *Primary school disruption over LGBT teaching/relationships education. How to manage parental concerns about the teaching of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) content in primary schools*. In it the Government anticipated extensive disruption by parents and faith groups opposed to the new RSHE. They anticipated that protesters may prevent children and staff getting into school and disrupt teaching and associated activities. The DfE also warned against the 'public victimisation of teachers, parents or children in relation to this topic', 'through social media... or in-person harassment'. The DfE cautioned that such activity was likely to be picked up by either local or national media, creating additional challenges for the school(s) involved.

The DfE anticipated that well-being support would be required for staff stating that disruptive activity (particularly where this is sustained over a period of time) could have an impact on well-being and mental health. However, the DfE stopped short of articulating what was at the heart of the objections by parents and faith groups to inclusive RSHE, nor did it say whether it expected LGBT teachers, parents and other school stakeholders to be more at risk during this period.

This anticipated disruption and opposition to the introduction of inclusive RSHE and guidance from the DfE for Heateachers is unprecedented and points to a climate of moral panic in the Education sector about the inclusion of LGBT identities into the curriculum. Walkerdine et al. (2001) describe 'moral panic' as public anxieties that identify certain behaviours as 'deviant' and a menace to the social order. Moral panic is the process of arousing social concern over an issue. Ringrose (2016) claims that moral panic can reveal the power of some educational discourses to grip the public imagination and individual psyches and enliven controversy and fear over the state of gender and sexuality. When moral panic takes place, it can then, help

us to articulate fears that are apparent yet can be resistant to naming or description. According to Ringrose (2016) moral panic often involves scapegoating a particular group as the evil responsible for a range of societal ills.

Schools have never been easy workplaces for LGBT people. LGBT identities and children and young people has always had the potential to stir moral panic in parents. A picture book in the late 1980s, depicting a child with two Fathers set in train events that led to Section 28 of the Local Government Act. Section 28 stated that 'A local authority shall not – (a) intentionally promote homosexuality... (b) promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship'. In 1988, when Section 28 was voted into law, the vast majority of state run schools were under local authority jurisdiction and so the common belief was that any LGBT teacher whose sexual identity was revealed at the school in which they worked, would lose their job. Several researchers recorded the climate of fear and homophobia that LGBT teachers endured in their day-to-day lives at school (see, for example, Clarke, 1996; Sullivan, 1993).

Clarke (2002) explores the harassment of some LGBT teachers by the tabloid press during the Section 28 era. For example, following the refusal of Hackney Headteacher Jane Brown to allow her pupils to attend a ballet performance of Romeo and Juliet, the UK's best-selling tabloid newspaper, *The Sun* ran a headline that stated 'Romeo, Romeo, where art thou homo?' Richard Littlejohn, a well know columnist for *The Sun*, referred to the Headteacher as a 'hatchet-faced dyke' who must be 'sacked immediately' (Clarke, 1996: 209).

In light of the advice from the DfE about potential disruption in opposition to inclusive Relationships and Sex Education, the start of academic year 2020 was set to be a particularly challenging year for those school stakeholders who identify as LGBT. LGBT teachers surveyed by the author at a training event in 2019 found that support to navigate the potential opposition to inclusive RSHE was their top professional development priority. So why does the inclusion of LGBT identities in the curriculum have the potential to cause such moral panic?

Though often not explicitly articulated, there is evidence that the most prevalent fear of LGBT teachers is that the parents of pupils, will associate their LGBT identity with discourses of hypersexuality and paedophilia (Thompson-Lee, 2017). School Leaders worry about the reputations of their school when there is any kind of teacher scandal, particularly scandal that is perceived to be related to sex. Sikes (2006) argues that when schools reference sexual activity or identity 'a discourses of scandalised outrage... provokes prurient curiosity, provides scope for self-righteous indignation and... moral panic' (p. 268). Teachers who are openly LGBT have often been subject to harassment and discrimination in particular from parents of children and young people at the school.

In 1998, when Section 28 of the UK Local Government Act has been law for 10 years, Clarke examined the way in which lesbian Physical Education teachers managed the intersection of their teacher and lesbian identities. Through

a series of interviews with teachers and trainee teachers, Clarke concluded that lesbian teachers lived with one often overwhelming fear relating to their exposure as a lesbian. Clarke states: 'Their chief fear . . . was that if their sexuality was revealed they would be viewed as paedophiles, child molesters and perverts' (1996: 201).

The UK is not alone. Many of the so called liberal countries of the Western world report a similar picture. For example, in the United States of America, Wright (2011) found that LGBT teachers feared losing their jobs due to parental perceptions that they may recruit children to homosexuality. In New Zealand, Jones (2004) observed that the school classroom is a 'complex risk environment' (p. 55), imbued with issues that are opaquely rooted in child protection discourses. Drawing on guidance aimed at keeping teachers safe from unfounded allegations of inappropriate behaviour, Jones concludes of teachers in New Zealand:

He/she is both a risk to children, and at risk from children; he/she is both dangerous and in danger. He/she may be a sexual molester, or he/she may be accused of sexual molestation, or violence. (p. 55)

Cavanagh (2008), researching lesbian teachers in Canada, argues moral panic about the protection of children is disingenuous. She contends that it instead masks a more 'deeply entrenched worry about the proliferation of queer identifications in school' (2008: 388). Cavanagh stresses that behind the adult investments in child protection there lies a determination to perpetuate and safeguard heteronormativity in schools (2008). Sikes and Piper (2010) similarly argue that discourses borne from fear surrounding transgressions of normative gender and sexual identifications serve to place children and their teachers in the binary of potential victim and potential abuser.

Child protection discourses are an important and inherent part of school life for teachers, parents and pupils. There is a greater awareness of child protection issues than ever before and this has served to create a more open dialogue, giving all school stakeholders the language to communicate better about child protection in schools. However, this openness has also inevitably led to a less positive set of circumstances. Piper and Sikes (2010) state that 'fear of the pedophile taints adult-child relationships in general' (p. 567). When every teacher has the potential to be under suspicion of child abuse, by default, every child becomes the potential victim of abuse. Piper and Sikes add that 'When the focus is on sex that is regarded as being outside of the norm . . . the difficulties are magnified' (2010: 567). The moral panic around child protection is a particular problem, therefore, for LGBT teachers in schools. As the title of the 2010 paper by Piper and Sikes declares, 'All Teachers are Vulnerable but Especially Gay Teachers' (p. 566).

Sullivan (1993), a lesbian teacher in a London school, wrote about her deeply entrenched concerns that the UK tabloid press would 'have a field day fabricating salacious headlines' (p. 99), if her sexual identity became common knowledge in her school. Though it is unlikely that in 2019

the sexuality of a teacher would be worthy of press attention in itself, transgender teachers do still attract media attention and this has ruined the careers and lives of several transgender teachers. For example, Lucy Meadows took her own life in 2017 after unacceptable treatment by the tabloid press. After aggressively pursuing her parents and partner at all hours of the day at home, *The Daily Mail's* Richard Littlejohn wrote a piece in his column entitled 'He's not only in the wrong body . . . he's in the wrong job'. Shortly after this, citing press intrusion as unbearable, Lucy committed suicide.

Sikes and Piper (2010) state that the 'obsession with children as actual or potential victims of sexual predation' can absurdly, cause them to 'become sexualised in a way they previously were not' (p. 20). The narratives that permeate safeguarding children places them in the binary of potential victim of abuse with their teachers as their potential perpetrators. Jones (2004) states that 'when the child is always-already a potential sexual victim, it follows that the teacher, or adult, is necessarily always-already a potential abuser' (p. 64). According to Jones (2004), over time, teachers have been taught often through continuous professional development training to internalise the narratives that make them the potential perpetrators of abuse. For example, in compulsory Safeguarding training, teachers learn that in order to protect themselves from unfounded or malicious allegations they must, for their own protection, remain at all times visible to other colleagues perpetuating the discourses that the constant surveillance of other colleagues is the factor preventing them from abusing the children in their care. Jones states, 'With naive faith in the external neutral gaze, union policy implies that reputational safety for teachers (and safety from abuse for children) resides in teachers' visibility' (p. 55).

The reliance on the external and neutral gaze of colleagues, sets in train an assumption that malicious or unfounded allegations are unlikely as long as the teacher remains visible. However, in reality allegations of sexual or physical abuse only very exceptionally have an uncontested single version of events. In tandem with this, child protection is a highly emotive issue and so it is rare for there to be external neutral gaze, such is the potential of this issue to evoke strong emotions in others.

King (2004), a gay male primary school teacher in London wrote about the anxieties and tensions that preoccupied him. His account captures the way in which he worried about how colleagues and parents perceived him when he was around children. He self-consciously monitored his behaviour when he was around children and worried incessantly about how colleagues and particularly parents would interpret his interactions with students. He describes a complex self-monitoring complex in which paranoia led him to wonder whether he was in fact a negative influence on the children he taught.

King demonstrates how, by going through the crippling ordeal of monitoring his own behaviour in the classroom, he inadvertently perpetuated the heteronormative and homophobic foundations which caused his self-monitoring. King worried that colleagues and parents would interpret his

interactions with children as predatory and over time, he began to internalise their concerns and worry about his own behaviour. Gray (2010) states that ‘The perceived link between homosexuality and paedophilia . . . contributes to the (re)production of the heteronormative discursive practices that dominate schools as educational institutions’ (p. 40). When there is a perceived link between homosexuality and paedophilia schools are complicit, often accidentally, in the rejection of all other representations of sexuality.

King (2004) suggests that gay teachers have to strike a ‘bad bargain’ (p. 123) with their school workplaces that is distracting and harmful for those who feel bound to subscribe to it. They are permitted to remain in post in exchange for a complete denial of their sexuality. King states that the bad bargain struck with their schools results in LGBT teachers self-consciously monitoring their behaviour, and policing themselves for evidence of their sexual identity in case a colleague, parent, or leader jumps to conclusions that jeopardise their progression through the school.

The DfE prescribed support for teachers caught up in the protests against LGBT inclusive RSHE and warn against damage to well-being and mental health. Prior to the parent protests against inclusive RSHE, Lee (2019) surveyed more than a hundred LGBT teachers in the UK found that over half of teachers surveyed had been diagnosed with depression and/or anxiety linked to their sexual identity and identity as a teacher. Lee found that heteronormativity and fear of child protectionist discourses deters LGBT teachers from being themselves in the workplace. Many LGBT teachers reported that it was necessary for them to separate their personal and professional identities in the school workplace. This manifested as teachers not being comfortable to take their partner to school social events, needing to live well outside the catchment area, and fastidiously managing the information they shared about themselves with colleagues, pupils, their parents. In 2010, Maycock et al. found that ‘psychological distress’ was prevalent among LGBT people and was ‘strongly associated with external stressors such as presumed heterosexuality, homophobia, prejudice and victimisation’ (p. 1). Meyer (2003) too attributes societal factors to psychological distress such as depression in lesbians and gay men. Meyer (2003) developed a model of ‘Minority Stress’ (p. 674) to describe extensive and acute exposure to stressful factors sustained by LGBT people. Drawing on Allport’s Theory of Personality (1955), and Goffman’s research on Social Stigma (1963) Meyer’s model of minority stress showed that LGBT people are highly susceptible to the negative consequences of stigma and prejudice when compared to their heterosexual and cisgendered peers. Meyer found that the mere perception of discrimination, stigma and prejudice can adversely affect the mental health of LGBT people who are three times as likely as the population at large to suffer from anxiety and depression. Lee’s research (2019) showed that 64% of LGBT teachers have experienced a serious episode of anxiety or depression linked to their sexual or gender identity and role as a teacher. This compares with just 31% of the overall teaching population experiencing a

mental health issue as reported in the Teacher Well-Being index (2018). Maycock et al. found that when LGBT people have to suppress or disguise their sexual and gender identity in the workplace, this leads to significant cognitive dissonance, adversely affecting LGBT health and well-being and ultimately often career progression.

Schools, local authorities and the DfE have a responsibility to the LGBT schools workforce, LGBT pupils and LGBT families. However, parents and faith groups have a right to protest and exercise their religious or moral beliefs, as faith is, like LGBT identity, a protected characteristic under the UK Equality Act. While facilitating the rights of all those protected under the Equality Act may at first seem a case of prioritising the rights of one protected group over another, the right to be free from discrimination should always be more important than the rights of anyone to be discriminatory.

Adelman and Lugg (2012) researching the school workplace in the USA assert that LGBT teachers are one of the least protected and so most vulnerable of all employees. Describing the tension that exists between the Safe Schools movement concerned with keeping students safe and the right to workplace equality. Adelman and Lugg suggest that school leaders and administrators are unwilling or unable to address anti-LGBT workplace issues ‘due to the persistent, albeit unwarranted, stigma regarding “recruitment” of youth by those expressing same-sex desire and/or gender non-conformity’. Schools in the USA are described as institutionally anti-LGBT by Adelman and Lugg who in common with the findings of Lee (2019) in the UK, identify a decrease in emotional well-being and elevated levels of depression and anxiety among LGBT teachers. LGBT teachers in the USA report that their actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity/expression is enough to mean they may be denied employment as a teacher in a school. Those who do get employment often perceive that they are denied promotion or given negative and unfair performance evaluations due to the prejudice of managers. Adelman and Lugg also found that some of the teachers they surveyed experienced overt verbal harassment, vandalism of possessions in the workplace and in some cases, physical violence from colleagues.

Adelman and Lugg state that LGBT teachers must take a calculated risk, over and over again in the workplace, of if, when, and how it is safe to ‘come out’; and equally when instead social conformity and heterosexual assimilation is required. Consequences of an anti-LGBT workplace include poor mental and physical health associated with enduring and pervasive stressful situations.

Teaching is an incredibly demanding profession. When the school workplace is hostile or toxic for LGBT teachers it can lead to burnout and a loss of human talent in teaching. Graves (2018) states that aspects of the teaching profession differentiate it from other types of public sector employment due to unsubstantiated but persistent fears that LGBT teachers will ‘recruit’ students to homosexuality. Henderon (2019) observes that in studies that focus specifically on LGBT teacher identities are rife with ‘historical discomfords specific to homosexualities and schooling’. She adds

that the acknowledgement of sexual identity threatens the very function of schooling when that sexual identity transgresses assumptions of heterosexuality, the threat is especially acute.

The discomfort felt by LGBT teachers (Henderson, 2019) became state sanctioned through Section 28, but now some 18 years later, the introduction of LGBT inclusive RSHE by the same Government serves, intentionally or otherwise, to atone at least in part for this period. However, the subsequent backlash the new RSHE guidance has provoked, has led journalists, sociologists, bloggers and social commentators to compare the moral panic surrounding RSHE with the Section 28 era. There are an estimated 50,000 LGBT teachers in English schools who are protected from harassment in the workplace by the Equality Act (2010). However, LGBT teachers report that equality policies do not necessarily make them feel any safer within their schools.

The protests by parents and faith groups about the LGBT inclusive RSHE have shown that LGBT teachers are vulnerable. For example, Andrew Moffat the openly gay Assistant Headteacher at Parkfield School in Birmingham was targeted for using 'No Outsiders' story books that had LGBT characters and celebrated difference. He has endured death threats and at the height of the protests needed police assistance to travel to and from school.

Sensational media reports and increased parent power have perpetuated moral panic, placing children and their teachers in the binary of potential victim and potential abuser. LGBT teachers have since Section 28 in 1988 endured a hostile working environment. When pervasive homophobia and heteronormativity is permitted within schools or outside the school gates, the mental health and well-being of LGBT teachers will suffer. Teaching is a difficult profession and it is not well paid. Consequently, it is challenging to recruit to the teaching profession in the UK and keep good teachers in our schools. As schools in England attempt to manage the moral panic about inclusive RSHE, it is important that school communities stand as one with their LGBT staff, pupils and families.


Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Catherine Lee  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4564-0787>

References

Adelman M and Lugg CA (2012) Public schools as workplaces: the queer gap between 'workplace equality' and 'safe schools'. *Law Journal for Social Justice* 3: 27–46.

Cavanagh SL (2008) Sex in the lesbian teacher's closet: the hybrid proliferation of queers in school. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 29(3): 387–399.

Clarke G (1996) Conforming and contesting with (a) difference: how lesbian students and teachers manage their identities. *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 6(2): 191–209.

Clarke G. (2002) Exploring the sporting and education experiences of lesbian Physical Education teachers. *Gender and sport: A reader*, p.209

Epstein D. and Johnson R. (1998) *Schooling sexualities*. McGraw-Hill Education (UK).

Graves K (2018) A matter of public concern: the First Amendment and equal employment for LGBT educators. *History of Education Quarterly* 58(3): 453–460.

Gray E. M. (2010) 'Miss, are You Bisexual?': The (re) production of Heteronormativity Within Schools and the Negotiation of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Teachers' Private and Professional Worlds (Doctoral dissertation, Lancaster University).

Henderson H (2019) Silence, obligation and fear in the possible selves of UK LGBT-identified teachers. *Gender and Education* 31(7): 849–865.

Jones A (2004) Social anxiety, sex, surveillance, and the 'safe' teacher. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 25(1): 53–66.

King JR (2004) The (im)possibility of gay teachers for young children. *Theory Into Practice* 43(2): 122–127.

Lee C (2019) Fifteen years on: the legacy of Section 28 for LGBT+ teachers in English schools. *Sex Education* 9: 675–690.

Maycock P, Bryan A, Carr N, et al. (2010) *Supporting LGBT Lives: A Study of the Mental Health and Well-Being of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People*. Dublin: Gay and Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN).

Meyer I. H. (2003) Prejudice, social stress, and mental health in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations: conceptual issues and research evidence. *Psychological bulletin* 129(5): 674.

Piper H and Sikes P (2010) All teachers are vulnerable but especially gay teachers: using composite fictions to protect research participants in pupil–teacher sex-related research. *Qualitative Inquiry* 16(7): 566–574.

Ringrose J., Gill R., Livingstone S. and Harvey L. (2012) *A Qualitative Study of Children, Young People and 'Sexing'* (London: NSPCC)

Ringrose J (2016) Postfeminist media panics over girls' 'sexualisation': implications for UK sex and relationship guidance and curriculum. In: Sauntson H and Sundaram V (eds) *Global Perspectives and Key Debates in Sex and Relationships Education: Addressing Issues of Gender, Sexuality, Plurality and Power*. London: Palgrave Pivot, pp. 30–47.

Sikes P (2006) Scandalous stories and dangerous liaisons: when female pupils and male teachers fall in love. *Sex Education* 6(3): 265–280.

Sikes P and Piper H (2010) *Researching Sex and Lies in the Classroom: Allegations of Sexual Misconduct in Schools*. London: Routledge.

Sullivan C (1993) Oppression: the experiences of a lesbian teacher in an inner city comprehensive school in the United Kingdom. *Gender and Education* 5(1): 93–101.

Thompson-Lee C (2017) *Heteronormativity in a Rural School Community: An Autoethnography*. New York, NY: Springer.

Walkerdine V, Lucey H and Melody J (2001) *Growing Up Girl: Psychosocial Explorations of Gender and Class*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Press.

Wright T. (2011) Tell me lies: Confronting the preschool closet. *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership* 14(2): 1–7.

Author biography

Catherine Lee is Deputy Dean for Education at Anglia Ruskin University in the East of England. Her research is based on the lived experiences of LGBT teachers and she is particularly interested in promoting diversity in school leadership development.

