

# Young adults' lesbian, gay and bisexual identity construction within schools: a post-Section 28 climate

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*My PhD research works within a socio-legal framework and engages with youth, sexuality and identity studies in seeking to discover how young adults within post-Section 28 school environments construct and understand their lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) identities. Analysing educational and social policy relating to sexualities and engaging with queer theory and notions of performativity, I attempt to understand how young people negotiate LGB identities through social practices and cultural discourses. This snapshot demonstrates why this work is necessary, outlining my intended research design and objectives and setting out my central research questions.*

*Keywords: Section 28, Schools, Young People, LGB Identity Construction, Heteronormativity, Homophobia, Queer Theory*

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## Introduction

This snapshot outlines my PhD thesis: '*Young Adults' Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Identity Construction – A Post-Section 28 Environment*'. The project is currently in its early stages; therefore I will not be making any solid conclusions in this snapshot, but will instead use this opportunity to highlight the need for my research. I outline what I intend to research and why; what I envisage my central research questions will be; and I indicate my initial thoughts on how I intend to conduct this research, all of which

are subject to change as I continue reviewing literature and developing my theoretical framework and methodology. This snapshot aims to give a taste of my work and encourage dialogue and debate within and beyond the field of gender studies in which my research is situated.

## Research overview

Section 28 (S28) was introduced in 1989 and stated that local authorities should not 'intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality' (Local Government Act

1988: s28(1) 2A. (1) (a)), nor should they 'promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretend family relationship' (s28 2A. (1) (b)). It was repealed in 2003. The primary purpose of my research is to discover how young adults within post-S28 school environments construct and understand their lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) identities. This will be achieved primarily through speaking to LGB young people, aged approximately 16-25, who have attended state school since the repeal of S28. I propose that not only are young people affected by the legacy of S28, but additionally, the heteronormative environment of schools can negatively affect LGB young people.

### **Why this research?**

Government funded research (Hunt and Jensen 2007; Guasp 2012) into the experiences of school pupils who identify as LGB highlights that homophobia in UK schools continues to be a major problem. This research identifies many of the complex issues around homophobic bullying and LGB identities, for example: prevalence of physical and verbal violence; gaps in knowledge about LGB identities; and lack of support and training for teachers. However, although policy *has* been developed (for example DCSF 2007a) and numerous recommendations for action to challenge homophobia in schools *have*

been made (for example DCSF 2007a, 2009a; Guasp 2009; Jennet et al. 2004; Warwick et al. 2004), no recommendations or policies are statutory. At best they only address the specific issue of bullying, but not wider problems such as the heteronormative environment of schools, or the ignorance on which much bullying is based. Furthermore, research on the implementation of these recommended actions and of the wider effects of homophobia and heteronormativity upon young people (see for example Rivers 2000, 2004, 2011; Warwick et al 2001) suggests that the effects of bullying and heteronormativity in school can be negative and have far-reaching implications. However, such research does not fully address these implications, nor has it been picked up and used productively in government policy or guidance.

My research aims to address these neglected areas by focusing on the lived experiences of young people who identified, or were beginning to identify, as LGB at school, and attempting to understand their identity negotiations within school environments. The research seeks to discover how LGB identities are developed and lived out within schools, and how experiences at school have affected LGB young adults in their wider lives. I will analyse educational and social policy relating to sexualities and examine how sexual identities are constructed at an experiential level in

relation to these policies in order to understand the current climate for LGB young people in schools. My research also aims to enhance the effectiveness of existing policy to combat homophobia in schools, and to contribute to policy debates around young people and sexuality.

On the surface, equality and diversity, including LGB rights, were high on the previous government's agenda and remain so within the current Coalition government, despite the change in fundamental political stances from left to right. For example, as well as the repeal of S28, Labour oversaw a range of education specific policies reflecting liberalising attitudes towards LGB identities (such as DCFS 2007a, 2007b; DfEE 2000a, 2000b; DfES 2003, 2004, 2006; Jennet et al. 2004; Miginiuolo 2007). Further, there are currently a number of campaigns specifically targeting homophobia in schools, and research, guidance and resources produced by NGOs, voluntary organisations and Unions, for example: *Education Champions Programme* (Stonewall 2010a); *Education for All* (Stonewall 2010b); *FIT* (Beadle-Blair 2010); *The Homophobia Project* (Orbaum 2010); *National Healthy Schools Programme* (DCSF 2009b); *Prevalence of Homophobia Surveys* (Oldham NUT 2008, 2010; Blackpool NUT 2009; Lancashire NUT 2009; Liverpool NUT 2010; Salford NUT 2010); and the ongoing work of the NSPCC, Schools Out, Diver-

sity Role Models and Educate and Celebrate<sup>1</sup>. However, the Government's own research, both Labour and Coalition (Hunt and Jensen 2007; Guasp 2012), highlights the significant gap between both administrations' stated aims and what is actually happening on a day-to-day basis for LGB young people.

Additionally, Labour's commitment to equality and diversity was not always met with support. This was particularly reflected by the turbulent ascent of the *Single Equality Bill* (2009-2010)<sup>2</sup> during their last Parliamentary session in government and a failure to implement the Act fully before the dissolution of Parliament. Indeed, since the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition took office in May 2010 there have been questions over whether the *Equality Act* (2010) will remain in its present format, or in fact at all. There have also been specific debates about if and how it relates to education, for example, Education Secretary Michael Gove has stated that:

The education provisions of the Equality Act 2010 which prohibit discrimination against individuals based on their protected characteristics (including sexual orientation) do not extend to the content of the curriculum. Any materials used in sex and relationship education lessons, therefore, will not be subject to the discrimination provisions of the act (Gove 2012, 1).

The current political climate raises questions about the government's future commitment to equality issues, and specifically, questions ensue about commitment to the Equality Act (2010) and the development of progressive work on LGB rights in education and further afield. As such, my research comes at an essential time, when the agenda of sexualities equality and diversity is fragile.

### **Key objectives and central research questions**

Having reviewed a significant amount of literature both around the specific issues of young people, education and non-normative sexuality (for example Ellis and High 2004; Epstein 1994, 2000; Harris 1990; Harris 1997; Jones and Mahony 1989; Rivers 1995, 2000, 2001, 2004, 2011; Trenchard and Warren 1984; Vicars 2006) and wider literature on non-normative sexualities, historically and in contemporary society (for example, Brickell 2006; Durham 1991; Foucault 1990; Richardson and Monro 2012; Sedgwick 2008; Weeks 2007), I have identified four key objectives which I aim to address in my thesis:

1) Explore the legacies of S28 and how these impact on young people in schools

2) Evaluate current practice regarding sexual identities within

schools in relation to existing policy

3) Examine how LGB young people understand their sexual identity development in relation to their school experiences

4) Understand how young people negotiate their sexuality within the school environment

5) The research objectives will be met through the theoretical and methodological frameworks outlined below, and through the following central research questions:

-What has the repeal of S28 meant for LGB identities in schools – in theory and in practice? (Objectives 1 and 2)

-How have LGB young people attending secondary school since S28's repeal experienced their sexuality? (Objectives 3 and 4)

-What impact does explicit homophobia in schools have on LGB young people, particularly in relation to their identity construction? (Objectives 3 and 4)

-What are the effects of heteronormativity in schools on sexual identity development of LGB young people? (Objectives 3 and 4)

-Why are schools particularly homophobic environ-

ments? (Objectives 1 and 2)

Together these five questions merge into one major research question, which is: How does the post-S28 school environment affect LGB young people's identity development?

### **Theoretical framework**

Whilst remaining firmly grounded in sociology and social policy, my work engages with youth, sexuality and identity studies (for example Savin-Williams 1990; Unks 1995; Owens 1998; Miceli 2002; D'Augelli and Patterson 2001; Mac an Ghail 1994) and with educational theories and frameworks relating to sexuality (such as Ali et al 2004; Epstein and Johnson 1998; Kehily 2002; Mac an Ghail 1994; Rasmussen et al 2004; Rasmussen 2006; Rofes 2005). In order to better understand LGB social and cultural positions and young people's sexual identity development, my research will also engage with queer theory and notions of performativity, using, for example, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (2006). Here, concepts from Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1990) and Eve K. Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (2008) will also be employed to explore the extent to which young people are able to negotiate non-heterosexual identities through competing social discourses.

My work views schools as institutions that discursively encourage

normative sexuality and thus as arenas where LGB identity constructions are problematic (see Thorne 1993; Owens 1998). Although my work focuses on the experiences of secondary school age youth, it seeks to explore how these young people arrived at their understandings of sexualities prior to their teenage years. These understandings will have inevitably been influenced by primary school experiences. As such I also engage with work on sexualities in primary schools (for example, Blaise 2005; DePalma and Atkinson 2008, 2009, 2010; Renold 2002) and will draw on the recent Economic and Social Research Council funded work - *No Outsiders* (see Allan et al 2008; Atkinson and DePalma 2009; DePalmer and Atkinson 2008, 2009, 2010; DePalma and Jenet 2010; No Outsiders Project Team 2010).

### **Methodology**

My research will be undertaken through a combination of policy analysis, qualitative interviews and focus groups. The policy analysis will focus on S28 and policies that aim to protect LGB people (see above). Textual analysis is ideally suited to deconstructing assumptions within policy documents and will thus be employed in order to examine the ways in which sexuality is understood within, and constructed by, policy. While textual analysis will be used to address research objectives 1 and 2, in order to better



understand individual experiences, understandings and processes of negotiation (research objectives 3 and 4), qualitative research will be undertaken in the form of one-to-one interviews with approximately 25 LGB young people from across the UK and 2 focus groups of between 5-9 LGB young people. The interviews and focus groups will be used to elicit accounts of experiences and emotions. The identified methodologies —policy analysis, qualitative interviews and focus groups— will complement each other to allow exploration of policy and subjective meanings, and of the similarities and differences between these.

### Conclusions

This snapshot has highlighted the need for my research, the gaps that it will fill and the contributions it will make across the UK. In summary, my main contributions will be to engage with and extend existing research on LGB issues, youth and education work; enhance the impact of existing educational and social policy in relation to LGB identities and young people; engage with policy development, crucial in this new political era; and, perhaps most importantly, make a real difference to young people's lives, particularly (but not limited to) LGB young people. In investigating the impact of discriminatory cultural climates on LGB young people, and identifying gaps in policy provision,

my work will explore how policy and social and cultural understandings of sexuality more broadly, can be formulated in ways which challenge discrimination. The proposed socio-legal focus of this research is thus timely, original and has significant possibilities for impact.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See [www.nspcc.org.uk](http://www.nspcc.org.uk); [www.schools-out.org.uk](http://www.schools-out.org.uk); [www.diversityrolemodels.org.uk](http://www.diversityrolemodels.org.uk); [www.ellybarnes.com](http://www.ellybarnes.com) for information on the work of these organisations.

<sup>2</sup> The Single Equality Bill (2009-2010) received royal assent on 8th April 2010 and became The Equality Act (2010). It aims to bring together different strands of equality law and thus make the law more transparent. The provisions of the Act came into force in October 2010 with a graduated timescale for implementation. However, the change in administration has meant changes to the implementation and timescale.

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