

It's important to be nice, but it's nicer to be important: girls, popularity and sexual competition

Neil Duncan*

University of Wolverhampton, Walsall, UK

A multi-method project was conducted in a Local Education Authority (LEA) in the north of England. The relationships between girls' friendships, bullying, school attendance and transfer were explored through documentary analysis, LEA school admission statistics, group interviews and q-sort technique. This paper reports selectively on those elements of the study that focussed on girls' popularity in high school. The qualitative data indicated that these girls thought their relationships altered once they settled in at secondary school, changing from an intimate dyadic same-sex friendship to a more fluid and strategic set of relationships set within a context of heteronormativity. The participants in the study expressed great interest in discussing and analysing personality and relationships through the research activities, and the author suggests such techniques might be valuable to explore these issues in regular Sex and Relationship Education lessons.

Introduction

Earlier research into gendered dimensions of bullying showed that many girls refused to attend schools or sought transfers to other schools due to harassment by peers (Duncan, 1999, 2002). Real reasons for seeking transfers were often concealed from parents and professionals for fear of retaliation by the aggressors, or because of internalized guilt and shame. In the histories of the girls fleeing from bullying, there was often a sexualized element to the harassment; accusations of being a lesbian, or heterosexual promiscuity were common means of attack. In every case, the harassers were described as 'popular girls'.

Douglas *et al.* (2001), stress the importance of Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) in the pastoral curriculum as a means of supporting young people who are vulnerable to oppressive social practices against sexual minorities, and the difficulties faced by schools in combating such practices. Forrest *et al.* (1997), signal the fact that talk about sexuality is already a core informal activity for young people in school, and that structured support from schools needs to be in place to provide a positive climate for such debate to flourish.

Government advice and instruction on related matters includes Circular 10/99

*School of Education, University of Wolverhampton, Gorway Road, Walsall, West Midlands WS1 3BD, UK. Email: N.Duncan@wlv.ac.uk

and the publications *Sex and Relationship Education Guidance* (DfEE, 2000), as well as the forthcoming Health Development Agency *Safe for All* guidance on homophobic and misogynistic aggression. The understandable concern with protecting sexual minority youth (Rivers & Duncan, 2002 *inter alia*), perhaps overlooks the collateral damage that impacts upon those young people who are not easily categorized or don't self-identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender etc., but who are still not beneficiaries of the prevailing heteronormativity in many schools (Epstein & Johnson, 1994; Lehtonen, 2002).

Other recent UK research into the exclusion and absence of girls from school (Osler *et al.*, 2002; Pearce *et al.*, 2003), appear to confirm that such girls are at serious risk in a number of ways, and that social friction amongst pupils at school is a main contributor to the social exclusion and isolation that precipitates that danger. This paper supports critiques by Bay-Cheng (2003) amongst others, of traditional and current approaches to sexuality education that are deficient of social context, and ignore desire and pleasure in sexuality. Teen sexuality is too narrowly defined, and should be acknowledged as 'packed with additional expectancies that shape adolescent sexual behaviours and relationships' (p. 69). It is, therefore, those socially situated, peer-subcultural, sexualized power systems that need to be explored and discussed. This study attempts to understand the relationship between girls' friendships, sexual identity and social power in schools.

Method

This part of the study was particularly concerned with the concept of 'popularity' amongst 12 groups of 15-year-old girls in high schools in one city in England's northwest. Two schools were all-girls, two were co-educational. Various ethnic minorities were present in each school, and several interview groups consisted of a majority of non-white students. The groups volunteered to be interviewed during PSHE lessons where Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) would normally be delivered. During the digitally recorded semi-structured group interviews, a group q-sort activity was also carried out (McKeown & Thomas, 1988). The q-sort process was digitally recorded as well as its outcome manually recorded. The interviews were later hand-coded and analysed thematically. All the interviews were conducted in the presence of a female member of staff known to the young women.

The girls were drawn from friendship groups in Year 10 (the penultimate year of compulsory schooling in the UK), identified by their Heads of Year. Three groups of around 4 or 5 girls were identified in each of four schools, chosen for not being either especially socially powerful or vulnerable. About 54 girls in total were invited to take part, all accepted, and permissions were then sought from the girls' parents. Participating individuals and schools have had their names altered for reasons of confidentiality. A prompt script was read to the group and the initial question asked 'does that sound like it is the sort of thing that might happen in this school?'

The prompt script, or vignette (Owens *et al.*, 2000), was modelled on a previous interview with an individual Year 10 (15-year-old) girl in another school. 'Claire' had moved schools more than once to escape harassment from her peers. The

vignette made oblique suggestions of friendship and broken trust involving a boy. Once the interview group had heard the story they were invited to comment on its plausibility and were asked questions on what they would advise Claire to do, what they knew of similar incidents, and generally to discuss girls' relationships, aggression, and schooling.

At a suitable point, the q-sort activity was introduced. The q-items were a set of statements on small cards (Appendix 1). The girls were told that each card represented a quality, state or trait that might be found in girls of their age: e.g. 'Sometimes smokes', 'Is very good at school work'. They were asked to sort the cards into three piles; those cards most strongly associated with the most popular girls in the school; those associated least with the most popular girls; and those that seemed irrelevant or neutral.

The q-sort items had originally comprised a set of nearly 50, but this was reduced through pilots to 28. The items were drawn up as statements from concepts in related literature on girls' friendships, as well as from brainstorming with focus groups of teachers, Education Welfare Officers and from earlier interviews with young women taking part in another study (Duncan, 2002). During the first three sessions in the present study, there remained unused about twenty items that were thought too ambiguous or irrelevant, and these were omitted from the later interviews.

The activity generated very rich discussion and vigorous debate in some cases. Once the initial sort had been completed, the groups were then asked to rank the items on a grid whose array signified those items' importance in relation to the other items and prepared the items for factor analysis (McKeown & Thomas, 1988).

The groups conducted the q-sorts with enthusiasm. Even one group that was very resistant to make any sort due to the inherent ambiguity of language ('it depends what you mean by popular', 'it depends what you mean by fashionable', etc.), still engaged closely with the material. The groups tended to make some key choices very firmly and with strong consensus, and discussed at length a smaller number of problematic items.

The interviewer (and author), being male, could well have affected the responses from the female interview groups. A considerable body of literature is devoted to this issue, but the only resolution for this study is that readers must interpret the transcriptions in the knowledge that, even with a female member of staff present in every case, it was a man asking the questions.

The groups were engaged by the interviewers in a very interactive mode, and were challenged, queried and interrogated on their choices and comments. It was very encouraging both for methodological reliability and for human optimism that the young women defended, counter-challenged and corrected our mistakes, mis-hearings and misconceptions with genuineness and openness.

Selected findings

The data presented here are qualitative, and comprise of the interviews and some simple indicative q-item choices only. The analysis of the q-data proper, that is the

factor analysis, is to be presented elsewhere. The findings below focus on the heterosexual orthodoxy of the social milieu in these high schools.

The girls interviewed were unanimous in their expressed belief that friendships between girls were very important, more so than for boys (Hey, 1997, but see also Mac An Ghail, 1994).

Low Road Girls School (Group 3)

Kisha: Boys' friendships are a joke...

ND: Their friendships are a joke?

Kisha: Yeah, they fall out and they don't try to make friends again, they don't exactly try to sort it out.

Trish: They fight with each other. We get emotional...

ND: Say that again, it's really interesting...

Kisha: Boys fall out and they don't try to make friends again, but girls would try to make friends.

ND: And which is the best way of approaching the problem then?

Kisha; Trish; Sal: The girls' way! (laughter).

ND: Do you think girls make and break friends better?

Sal: Yeah.

Kisha: We do it every second!

There was also a pronounced belief that the nature of their friendships had altered over the years, and several groups pointed to a difference between friendships in primary school and friendships in secondary school (from age 11 onwards).

Norrington Girls High (Group 1)

ND: Is it important that you move up from primary school with your mates?

Mel: It's not important...

Kerry: At first I think it is important...

Diane: When I came (to this secondary school), well none of us (the others in the room) went to the same primary school, but when I came I felt like I had to have my own friends just in case.

Pasture Meadow Comprehensive (Group 2)

ND: When you move up to secondary school with your primary school mates, do you think you keep the same mates or change them?

Susan: Change them.

Cathy: Yeah, you change them. (...) You still talk to them, like, but you don't hang around with them.

Most of the groups agreed that their relationships had altered qualitatively since primary school. In that situation, having a same-sex best friend was extremely

important, and was maintained through close contact in both the amount of time spent in each other's company, and in the exchange of confidences between the parties.

These homosocial relationships were jealously guarded, and took on some of the forms of a romantic relationship, with fidelity and exclusivity forming an important set of core values. The girls even had a special term of abuse for a girl who betrayed her partner by spending time in the company of another girl—'a go-off'. This compares with the term given to one who appropriates a friend from an existing relationship—'a friend-taker', referred to in other interviews with pupils elsewhere in the UK (Duncan, 2002).

Norrington Girls High (Group 1)

ND: (Trying to nick someone's best friend from them) is that something that happens between girls?

Kerry: Yeah (laughs)

Diane: Yeah, it does.

ND: What do you call it?

Kerry: Going off...

Mel: Going off, selling you out...

(...)

ND: Is that a big deal amongst girls, something that they would fall out about?

Mel; Kerry; Diane: Yeah.

(...)

Kerry: I think (parents and teachers) know about it but they don't say nothing, I think if it gets out of hand they step in, but...

Diane: They think you're being stupid...

ND: Do you think you're being stupid?

Diane: I do afterwards when I think about it, but at the time ... I don't know...

Kerry: When it's happening you just think 'I want to sort it out'...

Some of the groups said they retained those social practices, others became quite bashful at recounting the intensity of their same-sex relationships as if they were just becoming aware that the language they were using was strikingly like that of troubled heterosexual couples: 'she is trying to break us up', 'share her time between us'. Other groups found these problems memorable but laughable, and declared they had moved on, and that such a pairing was immature.

Carmel High (Group 3)

Zoe: Oh yeah (laughter) A go-off! (laughter) back in the days of Year 3! (Age 8)

Pasture Meadow Comprehensive (Group 1)

ND: Is it important to have a best mate (now)?

Beth: No, I haven't got a best mate...

Sara: It causes problems to have a best mate sometimes...(...) cos people say 'I thought I was your best mate'.

(...)

Sarah: It is dead childish.

Beth: Yeah, I won't have a best mate.

Sarah: Well I had two best mates and then one went off of me! (laughter)

ND: How about you?

Laura: No, I don't have a best mate.

Their current preferences were seen as much more adult, fluid, and heterosocial. The importance of friendships was still vital, but there was now an imperative to be widely known in the larger school community, and outside in the neighbourhood. A close, intimate, dyadic friendship might be an impediment to social mobility.

The purpose of this mobility was apparently to acquire and maintain high social status within the peer group, and to partake of the pleasures of immersion in the fast-flowing social life of the school. 'Gossip' was an important activity for the girls, raised by a number of the groups and subsequently by the interviewer. Tholander (2003) describes a multitude of gossip functions that can be picked out of the interviews, including enhancement of group cohesion by creating stronger group identifications and by clarifying group boundaries, as well as *Schadenfreude* from others' problems and its contribution to self-esteem.

It is important to acknowledge the pejorative sexist connotations of the term 'gossip', noted by the girls. They often referred to it in a very knowing way, that is to say they recognized it as an indulgence condemned by male authority and masculine values, but relished its thrill nonetheless. Recounting some incidents, the excitement of the narrators was evident in the raised tone, pace and pitch of the conversation, as below.

Pasture Meadow Comprehensive (Group 1)

ND: Are boys or girls nastier when they fall out?

Beth; Cass; Laura; Sarah; Janni: Girls!

Laura: Boys'll have a fight and next minute they'll be talking, but girls, it goes on for years!

Cass: They (boys) don't get involved, well they do but...

Laura: Like girls'll have an argument that goes on for years...

Beth: And girls involve everybody!

Cass; Laura; Sarah: Everybody!

Janni: Girls'll get everybody on their side.

(...)

Sarah: We love gossip! (laughter)

(...)

Laura: If they have a fight, that's all we wanna talk about—'did you see her hit her, how hard did she punch her?' (laughter).

Other forms of gossip were clearly non-sensational. They used the absence of key persons to explore emotive issues with reassurance, reparation or reconciliation. Generally the girls thought boys misunderstood and denigrated such talk.

Pasture Meadow Comprehensive (Group 3)

Jill: (you need a best friend) to talk about personal stuff. (...) Sometimes you can't speak to someone in your family, and you need your friends.

ND: Is it a girl thing, do you think, that you need to talk?

Jill; Pamela; Mandy; Charlotte; Millie: Yeah, yeah, (laughter)

ND: (Laughs) Is that why lads say girls are gossips then?

Jill; Pamela; Mandy; Charlotte; Millie: Yeah, yeah, (laughter)

When asked about transferring schools, the girls were unanimous in their priority of getting on with their peers before settling down to school work. In assessing the new order, the girls were very clear about their ability to discern who were the most socially powerful girls in any group. It was highly important to understand the peer hierarchy and to find a comfortable position within it.

Low Road Girls School (Group 3)

ND: Would it be a big deal to have to move schools at your age?

Mona; Manpreet; Sal; Trish; Kisha: Yeah...

Sal: Cos of your friends...

ND: Would the most important thing be keeping up with the work or fitting in with the girls?

Kisha: Fitting in with the other girls, cos then you could get on with your work.

(...)

ND: So would it not be important for Claire (the character in the vignette) to know who the most popular girls were?

Sal: She could *know* them, but not necessarily be friends with them...

Kisha: She should not try to be friends (with the popular girls) unless she fits in with them, she should find someone that likes the same things as she does.

The key term 'popular' was discussed at length in the groups, and featured in the q-sort constructions. This term, in its most widely understood adult sense, means well-liked or admired by many. For the girls in this and earlier studies (Duncan, 1999, 2002), the term was not fixed, but was far more concerned with social power

than widespread warm regard. Whilst many girls disputed each others' definitions, and most understood that the term could have multiple meanings, there was a general consensus that 'popular' was used to mean those girls who had the highest social status in the school, and was linked to heterosexual attractiveness.

The q-items that were most strongly associated with 'popular' were; 'Is very loud', 'Is very popular with boys', and 'Is very fashionable'. One could be popular in one's own clique, but to be known as one of *the* popular girls implied you would be brash, aggressive and involved in rumours and fights amongst the girls.

The most common answer to the question 'if I was to parachute you into another school, would you be able to spot the popular girls?' was 'yes, within a day'. Popularity was founded on an ability to gather other girls around them and to manipulate and coerce social relations in their favour.

Low Road Girls School (Group 3)

ND: What makes a girl popular in this school, do you think?

Kisha: Lots of friends...

Mona: Well, a big crowd round them...

Trish: Loud, confident people ... they've gotta be able to talk, haven't they?

Manpreet: And they have something different about them, don't they?

Pasture Meadow Comprehensive (Group 2)

ND: How would you know (who the popular girls were)?

Susan: The way they look at you. When you first come in.

ND: How would they look at you?

Susan: If they like you they would smile at you, or they would throw you dirty looks.

ND: So if they were popular girls...

Cathy: They'd throw you dirty looks.

ND: Why?

Cathy: Because we might not be as good as them.

Pasture Meadow Comprehensive (Group 3)

Jill: You could tell, the way they talk...

(...)

Jill: They judge you a lot, I think.

ND: What?

Jill: They judge you a lot. The not so popular people would say 'sit here with me', well that is what happened to me, but the popular people they judge you, look at you weird, and that...

Norrington Girls High (Group 2)

Hailey: The popular people aren't always that nice, what you'd call popular...

Ria: But some are, like Leanne, she's popular *and* nice, she hangs around with Trace and Bobbi...

Hailey: But she doesn't act like they do.

None of the girls interviewed said they wanted to be popular in that way, and although the interviewees were less than effusive about some of the popular girls' traits, none made directly critical remarks about those who had them:

Carmel High 3

Billie: People are scared of them...

Aliza: They are snobs because the way they look on people, like...

ND: They look down on people? Is that the people you would describe as socially powerful here?

Aliza: Yeah, yeah, but they are all right when you talk to them ... sometimes.

Candi: But I think people are popular because other people are scared of them, and that's what makes them popular...

The rationale for this reluctance to openly criticize is likely to be found in the understanding that popular girls were powerful enough to ostracize, traduce or even have beaten up, girls who challenged them.

Within the girls' social world, the most frequently agreed point of conflict was boys; their ownership or their desire; 'if you aren't popular with boys you couldn't be a popular person with girls'. All but one of the 12 interviews emphasized that the issue that girls fall out over most often was boys. Boys, on the other hand, were far less likely to fall out over girls, though they sometimes did. Some of the girls voiced a desire that they should do that more often, as it would show they valued the girls more. Some girls said that boys deliberately provoked fights between girls by flirting and 'touching-up' other girls. In this case, the interviewees' anger was directed at the other girls rather than at the flirting boys. The girls at Carmel High were very conscious about the link between sexual competition and physical violence:

Carmel High (Group 3)

ND: What do you think girls fall out about most?

(...)

Billie: Daft things, rumours and...

Aliza: Lads...

D'Arcy: 'You've been seeing my man! You have been givin' him a (indistinct)!' (Laughter)

Aliza: 'You were talking to my man, I saw you!' (Laughter) Seriously that is what they fight about. Even if they are not going out with them, but they like them, if they see them talking to another girl. Now that stupid girl ... this girl she ain't popular, but she knows popular people, like, and she started a fight ... (indistinct as all girls interject and talk across the group)

(...)

D'Arcy: Mmm ... but they might not even fancy him, but the girl wants a fight anyway so the lad will think 'she's into me, like'.

Aliza: And the boy thinks 'I'll go out with whoever wins this fight...'

Billie: They are too forward with boys...

ND: Do you really think the boy would choose on that basis?

D'Arcy; Aliza: Yeah!

The girls interviewed were fulsome about the amount of time they spent talking about boys they fancied or had relationships with. Even when heterosexuality was not so overt in conflicts, its external emblems were substituted; fashion, jewellery, and hairstyles were points of dispute, particularly when one felt one's style was being copied.

The social scene for these young women at school was founded upon and pervaded by a discourse of heteronormativity, particularly in the girls-only schools (Griffin, 1985). When the groups were offered the q-items to sort, they invariably chose 'is a lesbian' as the factor least likely to be associated with being a popular girl. This sexuality item took precedence over items on body shape, personality, substance misuse, heterosexual experience and intelligence. Conversely, very strong positive associations were found with 'is very popular with boys'. The disadvantage to being popular if you were a lesbian was not so much sexual disgust, as male homosexuality is often responded to by boys (Salisbury & Jackson, 1996), but an otherness based on ignorance. If you were a lesbian, how could you contribute to girl-talk, when that is so boy-focussed?

Low Road Girls' High (Group 3)

ND: 'Is a lesbian'?

Manpreet: Unlikely!

(...)

ND: Can you imagine a lesbian in this school being popular?

Kisha: Eeeugh!

Mona: No, cos once you...

Kisha: To be a popular girl in this school you mostly have all your friends and talk about boys...

Trish: And cos this school is an all girls school, everyone'd be there and it's like 'oh my god she's a lesbian!' but at the end of the day it's no big deal.

PSHE Teacher: It's no big deal, but everyone goes 'eeeugh she is a lesbian!'

Trish: Yeah, cos if she's a popular girl who turns into a lesbian, if you get me...(...) just switches...

(...)

Mona: They'd just turn sides and...

ND: Would she still be popular, or would she lose her popularity?

Trish; Mona: She'd lose it...

Mona: They'd turn sides and go to the next girl, the next most popular girl.

Despite the immediate selection of 'Is a lesbian' as the least popular attribute, there were some signs that, given more opportunity for safe talk, a deeper level of understanding and a less hostile response was possible.

Norrington Girls High (Group 1)

ND: So out of all these, which would you say is the most extreme here (on the least likely to be found amongst popular girls pile)?

Mel: I think that one ... is a lesbian!

Kerry: Well no (...) I think that might be more in the middle, cos, cos, sometimes people might think 'Oh wow! She's a lesbian', and like, want to go up to her and...

Mel: No...

ND: Would look up to her, did you say?

Kerry: Go 'are you really a lesbian?' and stuff like that...

Mel: No ... go up to her, and ... but that's kind of teasing her, and picking on her...

ND: Well not with everybody, obviously ... cos you (Kerry) don't think that...

Mel: Well...

ND: Would you go up to someone you thought was a lesbian and tease them?

Diane: Not if you knew them, I mean.

Kerry: I wouldn't tease them.

Mel: It would be something to talk about.

(...)

ND: Do you think this (the q-sort) is hard to do?

Mel; Kerry; Diane; Kyla: Yeah! (Laughter)

ND: Is it boring?

Mel; Kerry; Diane; Kyla: No.

ND: Have you thought about this stuff before?

Mel; Kerry; Diane; Kyla: No.

Discussion

This study allowed some useful insights into how constructions of sexuality and popularity are vital factors in the school-based relationships of young women. Although one cannot and should not generalize from this quantity and type of data, some recurring themes emerge from the interviews and q-activities that are worthy of consideration. The following discussion therefore, is speculative and invitational rather than definitive and conclusive.

Most of the girls felt they needed the security of their primary school girlfriends on arrival at high school, but quickly moved on to other relationships. This was due, in part at least, to the wider opportunities for friendships, but also to the high schools' deliberate splitting up of established friends from the same feeder schools.

Once the girls had settled in high school, some, perhaps the less confident and less mature students (noted by the school staff in some cases as being 'young for their age'), developed replicate best-friendships with other girls. For these young women, the vignette of Claire's relationship problems seemed very plausible, and several disclosed similar experiences. These close same-sex relationships shared some characteristics with romantic partnerships in their expectations of fidelity, commitment, intimacy (though not admittedly sexual), longevity and mutual support. Some of the language used to describe these friendships resonated with troubled romantic triads—'tore us apart', 'took her off me', etc. The fact that special phrases were coined for roles played out in this culture emphasized their importance—'friend-taker', 'go-off', 'sell-out'.

For some of the more confident, socially-skilled and mature young women, such relationships were shed, or claimed to be shed, on entry to high school. Their view was that close same-sex pairings were immature. Their subsequent relationships were more open and perhaps strategic, as they played the field, gaining an esteemed reputation—'everyone knows you'—free of the baggage of a best friend. To be well known, admired by many, and at the centre of what is socially happening, was a highly desired goal for most of the young women interviewed.

None of the interviewees laid claim to being amongst the most popular girls in their school. This may not have been the case if the interviewees had greater confidence in the group interview situation. One girl did say that a q-item didn't apply because *she* was popular and the item didn't apply to *her*. She was quickly rounded on by her friends for 'fancying herself' and, chastened, repeated 'I was only joking! As if!' One interpretation of this reluctance to stake a claim for popularity is the fear of having to back it up with the dominant popular girls if it was reported to them. Throughout the interviews, girls raised the point that one could be a popular member of a number of social groups, but if that group held low status within the school overall, then you would not have the social power of *the* popular girls.

Amongst the girls in these schools, there were indications of a strong heteronormative competition for popularity and social status. The fashion sense, the skilled oratory, the loud confidence and successful experience with boys were all central to being popular. The q-items selected as most antithetical to being popular amongst the girls were strikingly non-boy-centred—being a lesbian, being quiet, and having special needs. If you were a lesbian, the young women construed, and the currency of the community was boy-talk and boy-think, then one would have nothing to contribute to the commonweal.

On most occasions when the q-item 'Has special needs' was selected for relegation, one of the girls would query that term—'what do you mean by special needs ... like disabled?' Despite discussion on the different types of special need, and the mildness of some forms—'Allie has dyslexia, she's quite popular,' the item was always considered more a disadvantage to popularity than drug-taking, pregnancy,

being quite fat, and so on. This construction of special needs requires further investigation, but it is possible that it links in with a common disablist discourse where people with special needs are asexual (Vernon, 1999). One only has to consider the fact that *Gentlemen* have their own public toilets and *Ladies* do too, so people using *Disabled* must be neither...

The final q-item in the sharp end of the negative triangle was 'Is very quiet'. The defensible interpretation of this is by no means secure, but perhaps one rationale extending from the previous argument for this item's inclusion is that being quiet is somehow a handicap to compulsorily heterosexual success within the culture of the school. Whilst a surprise to the author at least, the consistency with which this item was deselected as an attribute of popularity by the girls, and their justification for it, is somewhat convincing—'no one's gonna know them, innit?' One possibility for the connection of loudness and brashness with successful social power may be associated with a fairly recent trend in UK television content.

There has been an arrival of popular tv programmes that are based on extreme self-promotion of members of the public. One of the progenitors of this genre of programme is the long running and immensely popular '*Blind Date*' (see Hagen, 1998), in which (usually) young people make an excited plea to be chosen from two others for a heterosexual partner. With the advent of cable and satellite channels in the UK, whole strands are now devoted to similar, but more extreme adult entertainment.

Whilst these programmes' formats vary from the 'Pop Star' auditions to the 'Select a Beau' competitions, the common factor here is the frantic 'choose me' ethos of entertainment aimed mainly at young women (this new phenomenon has had little research to date, but see Syvertsen, 2001). The imperative of being as brazenly heterosexually competitive as possible seems to have been assimilated into the culture of young women at these schools. Even those girls that shied away from the social limelight, who were modest and cautious, appeared to recognize that the success of the most popular girls was tied to a relentless public narcissism.

This competitive, combative culture might be heard as an echo of the national culture of competition in education (and more widely). LEA against LEA with Audit Commission reports, school against school with league tables, teacher against teacher with threshold payments and performance related pay, and pupil against pupil with examinations, there is always a superordinate setting higher targets, improving performance and condemning satisfaction as complacency (Hardman & Levacic, 1997; Duncan, 2003).

With such an ethos and at such a pace, the essentially human concerns of interpersonal and social relationships are compressed and distorted into the shapes described above. Schools are such uniquely important sites for identity formation they must not miss the chance of supporting real and genuine reflection on the social systems that form the community. Even in this study, despite the item 'Is a lesbian' being immediately deselected, the discussions for that decision were very promising in terms of reflection. Where the interviewer was able to effect a pause in the activity, there were definite signs that the response to that item was a gut reaction, and the young women were interested and able to discuss their choice at a deeper level.

Given time and support, these are just the sorts of small safe SRE group activities that develop understanding and reduce intolerance.

Some possibilities

Limitations on space prevents this paper accounting for the important aspects of race, faith, class or dis/ability, though the expectation is that those vital dimensions will be addressed in other outcomes of the main study. However, the implication of competitive heteronormative school cultures is a continuation and consolidation of intolerance of diversity, leading to bullying and oppression of minorities even yet to be defined, for example, simply quiet children.

To face this situation and implement pro-social changes in school cultures, the relationships component of SRE must be rendered locally visible, and clearly linked to the sexual nature of our gendered school communities. Sexuality, in the context of SRE, must be widened from its mechanistic and over-obvious core syllabus (Mearor *et al.*, 2000) to include sexualized relationships that otherwise remain unproblematized. In the same way that anti-racist initiatives have widened from the overt violent behaviours of an oppressive majority to expose the subscribing discourse, SRE needs to venture out of the comfort zone and stimulate discussion of the pleasures and perils of aggressive heterosexual competitiveness.

The power systems that are prevalent in our schools inhibit free and relaxed discussion: a consistent response from the interviewees was that they would prefer to talk to a woman about these issues if they were directly affected, but even female teachers were not considered especially appropriate. This point challenges the wisdom of funding additional training of teachers in this area of SRE, and suggests the incorporation of arms-length agencies to provide more open-ended, non-didactic support (Sex Education Forum, 2002).

However, without a commensurate change in schools as morally censorious institutions, and that necessarily involves teachers in a fundamental way, the links between heteronormativity and social oppression will continue its manifestation in sexual bullying. To effect a culture change at school levels means a re-evaluation of governmental priorities. One might take courage, however, in this LEA's (qualified) successes of anti-racist education: the q-items most consistently placed in the neutral/irrelevant area of the grid were 'Is white' and 'Is not white', along with the accompanying statement 'that makes no difference to being popular'.

References

- Bay-Cheng, L. Y. (2003) The trouble of teen sex: the construction of adolescent sexuality through school-based sexuality education, *Sex Education* 3(1), 61–74.
- Department for Education and Employment (2000) *Sex and relationship education guidance* (Nottingham, DfEE).
- Douglas, N., Kemp, S., Aggleton, P. & Warwick, I. (2001) The role of external professionals in education about sexual orientation—towards good practice, *Sex Education*, 1(2), 149–162.
- Duncan, N. (1999) *Sexual bullying: gender conflict and pupil culture in secondary schools* (London, Routledge).

- Duncan, N. (2002) Girls, bullying and school transfer, in: V. Sunnari, J. Kangasvuo & M. Heikkinen (Eds) *Gendered and sexualised violence in educational environments* (Oulu, Femina Borealis).
- Duncan, N. (2003) Pupil mobility: another twist in the spiral of decline? *Forum for 3–19 Comprehensive Education*, 45(2), 61–63.
- Epstein, D. & Johnson, R. (1994) On the straight and narrow: the heterosexual presumption, homophobias and schools, in: D. Epstein (Ed.) *Challenging lesbian and gay inequalities in education* (Buckingham, Open University Press).
- Forrest, S., Biddle, G. & Clift, S. (1997) *Talking about homosexuality in the secondary school* (Horsham, Avert).
- Griffin, C. (1985) *Typical girls? Women from school to the job market* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul).
- Hagen, I. (1998) Reaching the wrong audience? fascination and ironic distance in viewers' relationship to Blind Date, paper presented at the *International Association of Media and Communication Research, Popular Culture Working Group*, Glasgow.
- Hardman, J. & Levacic, R. (1997) The impact of competition on secondary schools, in: R. Glatter, P. Woods & C. Bagley (Eds) *Choice and diversity in schooling: perspectives and prospects* (London, Routledge).
- Hey, V. (1997) *The company she keeps: an ethnography of girls' friendships* (Buckingham, Open University Press).
- Lehtonen, J. (2002) Heteronormativity and name-calling—constructing boundaries for students' genders and sexualities, in: V. Sunnari, J. Kangasvuo & M. Heikkinen (Eds) *Gendered and sexualised violence in educational environments* (Oulu, Femina Borealis).
- Mac An Ghaill, M. (1994) *The making of men: masculinities, sexualities and schooling* (Buckingham, Open University Press).
- Mearns, L., Tiffin, C. & Miller, K. (2000) *Young people's views on sex education: education, attitudes and behaviour* (London, Routledge).
- McKeown, B. & Thomas, D. (1988) *Q-methodology* (London, Sage).
- Osler, A., Street, C., Lall, M. & Vincent, K. (2002) *Not a problem? Girls and school exclusion* (London, NCB).
- Owens, L., Slee, P. & Shute, R. (2000) 'It hurts a hell of a lot'...The effects of indirect aggression on teenage girls, *School Psychology International*, 21(4), 359–376.
- Pearce, J. J., Williams, M. & Galvin, C. (2003) *'It's someone taking a part of you': A study of young women and sexual exploitation* (London, NCB).
- Rivers, I. & Duncan, N. (2002) Understanding homophobic bullying in schools: building a safe learning environment for all pupils, *Youth and Policy*, 75, 30–41.
- Salisbury, J. & Jackson, D. (1996) *Challenging macho values: practical ways of working with adolescent boys* (London, Falmer).
- Sex Education Forum (2000) *Sex education matters*, 27 (London, National Children's Bureau).
- Syvrtsen, T. (2001) Ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances: a study of participants in television dating games, *Media, Culture and Society*, 23, 319–337.
- Tholander, M. (2003) Pupils' gossip as remedial action, *Discourse Studies*, 5(1), 101–129.
- Vernon, A. (1999) The dialectics of multiple identities and the disabled people's movement, *Disability and Society*, 14(3), 385–398.

Appendix 1: q-sort items

1. Has a lot of friends
2. Has one very close friend
3. Is very quiet
4. Is very loud
5. Is very fashionable
6. Comes from a tough family
7. Is a virgin
8. Is very well behaved at school
9. Is often in trouble with teachers
10. Misses a lot of school
11. Is very good at school work
12. Gets involved in fights with other girls
13. Spreads rumours about other girls
14. Is well liked by the teachers
15. Is well liked by other pupils
16. Is very popular with boys
17. Goes out with older boys
18. Sometimes drinks alcohol
19. Is a lesbian
20. Sometimes smokes
20. Sometimes takes drugs
20. Is white
20. Is not white
20. Is quite fat
20. Is quite thin
20. Has 'hard' friends
20. Is kind to other pupils
20. Has special needs