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We Don’t Get Into All That”: An Analysis of How

Teachers Uphold Heteronormative Sex and Relationship Education

**Abstract**

Legislation that applies to UK SRE currently advocates inclusive provision. Given the non statutory status of SRE, however, it is unclear how teachers incorporate sexual inclusivity, especially as research has shown that teachers’ discursive practices can promote a heteronormative SRE climate (Renn, 2010). Using a discursive psychological approach to analyze interview data, this study examined how teachers account for their provision as inclusive. It was revealed that even when promoting their inclusivity, teachers’ SRE provision upholds heteronormativity. In doing this, they positioned LGB and same-sex practices outside of the classroom, potentially leaving these young people without a sufficient sex education.

KEYWORDS discursive psychology, heteronormative, homophobia, inclusivity, sex and relationship education, UK, young people

INTRODUCTION

The issues present within UK secondary school sex and relationship education (SRE) have long been highlighted in many studies (e.g., Corteen, 2006; Measor, Tiffin, & Miller, 2000; Measor, 2004; Sex Education Forum, 2011), with notable concerns being that SRE fails to meet young people’s needs and falls short of their expectations (e.g., Biddulph, 2006; Corteen, 2006; UK Youth Parliament, 2007). These issues reflect a climate of controversy surrounding sex education in the UK and are most visibly documented in the media where stakeholders (predominantly parents and religious groups) mobilize arguments concerning young people’s “vulnerability” and “early sexualization.” Since being introduced as part of the school curriculum around 1960, the history of UK SRE has subsequently been fraught. Many of its problems arose as a result of the sociopolitical climate and a lack of consensus regarding the role of SRE and its values. Specifically, those with diverging political ideologies and traditions are discordant in the view of whether the primary role of sex education is to address either health or moral concerns (Thomson, 1994). These tensions have played out mainly between local and central governments and also between moral traditionalists and health campaigners (Monk, 1998; Thomson, 1993, 1994). This failure to reach political consensus regarding the role of SRE is not specific to the UK, however, with similar issues surrounding US SRE (Thomson, 1994). Other countries (e.g., Sweden, the Netherlands) do have a more unified approach, however (Lewis & Knijn, 2002), suggesting that the nature of SRE is specific to its surrounding context.

The UK government’s responses to social changes, most notably those related to sexual relations, have historically served to determine the aims of sex education. For example, the right-wing sexual moralism long espoused by the Conservative government,1 particularly in the 1980s, resulted in sex education being used as a means of teaching young people about traditional sexual values through moral rhetoric (Waites, 2003). Growing concerns for social stability during this time also meant that sex education reflected public health issues, including high rates of unplanned pregnancy, sexually transmitted illnesses (STIs), and the emergence of HIV/AIDS. What followed was a plethora of initiatives and strategies aimed at containing young people’s sexual activity, such as the teenage pregnancy strategy launched in 1999 with the aim of halving the conception rates of individuals under the age of 18 by 2010 (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999). A string of more prohibitive legislation also reflects the government’s attempts to intervene and regulate young people’s sexuality. Section 28 of the Local Government Act (1988), which prohibited the “promotion” of homosexuality in schools, is an example of this.

UK sex education has therefore largely focused on reinforcing “acceptable” sexuality (i.e., promoting sex within marriage) while trying to address public health concerns. The policy related to SRE has played a significant role in establishing this agenda. For example, the importance of a moral framework was set firmly within a series of Education Acts (starting from 1986) and has been consolidated in subsequent policy changes and amendments. This legislation provided a moral context for young people’s sexual behavior, placing sex within the boundaries of both marriage and fidelity. The publication of SRE guidance in 2000 (DfEE) made some important and promising developments around changing the scope of SRE, particularly as it outlines the importance of social aspects of SRE for young people in its definition of SRE as “the teaching of sex, sexuality, and sexual health” (p. 5). The guidance further provides the foundations for SRE that is inclusive where it calls for respect in social, cultural, and sexual diversity. In keeping with the new National Curriculum for England and Wales (DfEE, 1999), it states: “Young people, whatever their developing sexuality, need to feel that sex and relationships education is relevant to them and sensitive to their needs” (p. 12).

Despite this more progressive position, the document features a number of contradictory discourses that undermine any real commitment toward diversity (Atkinson, 2002). For example, the guidance reinforces curtailments around discussions of non-heterosexuality within SRE and reinstates the power of parents by emphasizing the importance of parental consultation on this matter. It also advocates the “value” of marriage as being the appropriate context for (heterosexual) sex and child rearing as emphasized in previous policy documents relating to SRE and as outlined within the current legal framework (in England, as set out within the Education Act (1996) and the Learning and Skills Act3 (2000)).

While development in the national curriculum and guidance allow for positive changes to provision, SRE is not statutory outside of the National Science Curriculum. This has resulted in content predominantly being taught within a biological and health framework, with a focus on biological aspects of puberty, sexual reproduction, and the spread of viruses, particularly HIV/ AIDS. It thus remains narrow in scope, with provision often being limited to delaying incidences of first sex, decreasing the number of sexual partners, and increasing sexual “safety” through contraceptive use (SEF, 2008; Thomson, 1994). As such, provision has focused primarily on (hetero)sexual health and (hetero)sexual activity (Corteen, 2006; Epstein & Johnson, 1994, 1998). Within this framework, heterosexuality and procreative sex are marked as “normal” (Moran, 2001), and “real” sex is defined narrowly as penis-in-vagina intercourse between a man and women.

SRE is therefore criticized not only for limiting young people’s knowledge and repertoire about sex and sexuality (Harrison & Hillier, 1999: Jackson, 1999) but also for the way it leaves those who identify as lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) with little to no sex education that reflects their experiences (Hunt & Jenson, 2007). The implication of this is that young people are prevented from receiving specific information necessary to practice safe sex and develop sexual competence. Moreover, the lack of language within SRE for discussing LGB sexuality and, indeed, same-sex sexual practices and desires acts as a barrier for the sexual health of individuals with these needs. The lack of diversity in sexual identities and practices in SRE content is further illustrated by the omission of information regarding non penetrative sexual practices such as mutual masturbation, oral sex, and anal sex as alternative sources of sexual pleasure (Forrest, Strange, & Oakley, 2004). More problematically, research indicates that when LGB sexuality is included in the formal curriculum, it is often fraught with problems and regarded by pupils as largely unhelpful (Ellis & High, 2004; Mac an Ghaill, 1991). Sex between males in particular is typically discussed in reference to HIV (Epstein

& Johnson, 1994), using pathologizing discourses, or delivered as a stand-alone topic that presents LGB sexualities as “other,” which works to reinforce a discourse of difference (Atkinson, 2002).

The current SRE guidance also stipulates that content is chiefly determined at the level of schools. Individual teachers have no restrictions when deciding both their approach to and delivery of SRE. Consequently, this is subject to the influence of more localized factors such as STI and pregnancy figures within that particular region, and by stakeholders such as parents, school governors, and management. While beneficial in some ways, this contributes to a varied and often value-led approach, in addition to provision that ultimately serves the interests of key interest groups rather than young people themselves. Research has shown that teachers face many barriers in the provision of SRE (Atkinson, 2002; Buston, Wight, & Hart, 2002; Chambers, van Loon & Tincknell, 2004).

Further emphasis on the importance of teachers’ roles in learning about sexuality is realized through what they explicitly teach, such as the aforementioned biological aspects of sexuality, but also the emphasis on associated risks, shifting the focus away from useful information such as negotiating condom use or non penetrative sexual activity (Mayo, 2011). Equally as important is the idea that what is taught by teachers in SRE is not just about information, affirmation, or prohibition regarding certain practices (Gilbert, 2007); teachers should be assisting students in the formation of their identities and becoming members of the community and the world (Mayo, 2013). Irrespective of SRE content, it is argued that all teachers should be aware that schools are structured by heterosexism and that the school context further exacerbates existing divisions such as this through homophobia, expressions of dislike, and harassment (Mayo, 2013). Moreover, it has been reported that classroom discussions of homosexuality encourage controversy (Applebaum, 2003) and can initiate forms of hate speech (Boler, 2004; Mayo, 2007), with studies and legal cases reporting that while students and parents do report harassment, it is the schools that do not respond.

While the teachers thus play a crucial role in the provision of SRE, the way in which they shape provision is largely under researched within this context. This is of particular importance given SRE’s non statutory status and the current policy context. While it remains unclear whether the current government plans to make any changes to this policy, what is clear is the responsibility of schools to provide inclusive provision under the National

Curriculum for England and Wales (DfEE, 1999) and particularly the Equality Act.2 (2010) Despite working under legislation that requires inclusive provision, it is unclear how teachers implement this, particularly under current contradictory guidance (DfEE, 2000) where content is subject to interpretation and individual ideology. As such, this is an important avenue for current research, particularly in light of extensive literature that signals the heterosexist nature of SRE (Ellis & High, 2004; Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Stonewall, 2007). It is pertinent to identify the nature of current barriers that prevent the recognition of diversity, given that young people now engage in a wider range of sexual practices outside and in addition to penetrative intercourse, regardless of sexual identity (Carpenter, 2001; Diamond & Butterworth, 2008; Hirst, 2004; Jackson, 2004; Stone, Hatherall, Ingham, & McEachran, 2006).

Despite the number of studies recognizing the barriers to more inclusive SRE, relatively little of this is underpinned by a constructionist framework. Characterized by its antifoundational stance toward “truth” (Potter & Hepburn, 2008) or objective knowledge that is assumed unattainable (Edwards, Ash-more, & Potter, 1995; Potter, 1996), a central feature of this approach is the theoretical importance of language and its use as a resource by which an individual constructs reality (see Gergen, 1985). Research conducted within this framework examines the way in which reality is socially constructed within a particular social, cultural, and historical context, in order to explore the way it shapes human experience and social practice (Willig, 2001). This differs from more realist approaches where emphasis is placed on individuals as perceivers, and concern rests with the underlying structures of psychological phenomena or human experience.

Discursive psychology (DP) is a broadly constructionist approach that applies the ideas from discourse analysis to “respecify” a range of traditional psychological topics, such as memory and attitudes, as discourse practice (Edwards, 2005; Potter, 1998). Discursive psychology treats talk and texts as social practices, and it focuses on how these practices are performed in interaction. As such, work in DP “considers how that interaction is done, and what resources it draws on, and how these things relate to broader questions in social psychology” (Potter, 1998, p. 235). Discursive practices are thus examined for the way they inform the researcher about the rhetorical and social actions being achieved in the talk, such as the way particular discursive practices reveal the way people manage certain interests within a particular context. Discursive psychologists have illustrated the many ways in which people’s accounts of various events and descriptions show continual utterances, which fit the rhetorical demands of the moment (i.e., Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). The emphasis on accountability has been a significant focus for discursive psychologists (e.g., Wooffitt, 1992). Investigations within DP have included the production of racism and prejudice (Edwards, 2003; Wetherell & Potter, 1992) and how sexism and hetero-sexism is accounted for (Riley, 2002; Speer & Potter, 2000). The oftensubtle rhetorical organization and accomplishment of this particular talk has increased feminist engagement with DP.

In light of the aforementioned heterosexist nature of SRE, examination of teachers’ discursive practices under a discursive psychological approach allows us to examine how heterosexist provision is upheld, managed, and achieved in the face of direct questioning. This is particularly achieved through the examination of what is at stake for the teachers and is undetectable using more traditional (particularly essentialist) methodologies. While these practices are often very subtle, research (Speer & Potter, 2000) has shown that issues of stake are commonly revealed in discursive practice through individuals’ attempts to contrast the available counter claims. As such, teachers’ subtle forms of heteronormativity may be detected through examination of their talk of inclusivity. For example, teachers’ talk, such as the overemphasis on the discrimination of LGB individuals (Britzman & Gilbert, 2004) can serve to reinforce social constructed (homosexual/heterosexual) binaries (Renn, 2010). What we can learn from such an approach within this context is the discursive barriers in teachers’ accounts that influence young people’s sexual subjectivities, prevent inclusivity, and contribute toward inequality. It is argued that teachers and school leaders should reflect on how they respond to homophobia, focusing on the creation of a climate where non discrimination policies are created, reinforced, and supported by all (Mayo, 2013). This could also protect against other subtle instances in which teachers’ talk indirectly leads to discrimination, such as when the blame of a student for homophobia toward LGB individuals leads to revictimization (Capper, Schulte, & McKinney, 2009). To our knowledge, studies have yet to examine how teachers of SRE organize their discourse around sexual diversity issues using a discursive psychological approach. The purpose of this article is therefore to identify the arguments teachers use to uphold heteronormative provision and or which, prevent inclusivity being realized in this context.

METHOD

The analysis and extracts presented in this article are derived from a research project examining young people’s sexuality within SRE, involving eight semi-structured interviews with SRE teachers in secondary schools across Yorkshire, England. SRE coordinators were invited to participate based on their formative role within this context and their assumed knowledge of the various legislative requirements that have an impact on provision. The interviews lasted between 40 and 90 minutes and were carried out on school premises (classroom, office, or staffroom). An interview schedule broadly specified topics to be discussed, informed by the literature as pertinent to the content and delivery of SRE. Examples of the topic areas included SRE approach content and policy, barriers to provision, and teacher evaluations. The excerpts shown are predominantly responses to a pivotal question regarding whether teachers fulfill their policy obligations to provide inclusive SRE provision, particularly around sexual diversity. The excerpts are taken from two interviews and were selected for the way they represent how teachers set about to account for diversity in their provision. The interviews were transcribed using Jefferson notation conventions, a system commonly used for producing detailed discursive analyses. These conventions allow the researcher to capture many of the complex and analytically important aspects of interaction such as changes in intonation, emphasis, and volume, in addition to length of pauses and repairs (see Atkinson & Heritage, 1984). All names featured in this article are pseudonyms.

Participants

Both teachers presented in this analysis were White and of British nationality. They were full-time PSHE coordinators, teaching in coeducational public schools. The time each had spent teaching PSHE (and SRE specifically) varied between 8 and 15 years. Both teachers varied in terms of their training; while they both reported attending some short courses related to PSHE, some of these related to the leadership element of the role. One of the teachers (Carl) has an external position as an advanced skills teacher (AST), which involves outreach work in other schools to share good practice in PSHE. Additionally, Carl has established PSHE as a department within his school. In contrast, Heather had completed a short SRE course involving the formulation of Peer Activities in Sexual Health (PASH). In line with the content of provision and the nature of teachers’ descriptions, both teachers’ SRE provision can be broadly classed as a health promotion approach.

Analytic Framework and Procedure

A discourse analytical approach was applied to the data, based on the work of Potter and Wetherell (1987) and informed by DP (Potter, 1996; Potter & Edwards, 2001). In light of concerns toward identifying how teachers account for inclusive provision, DP was selected for the way it enables focus on both the constructive and functional dimensions of teachers’ discourse around provision. It allowed for examination of how inclusivity is accounted for within teachers’ descriptions of their provision, in addition to the discursive processes through which sexual diversity among students is represented. As such, analytic focus was placed on identification of the discursive practices and resources that underlie interaction, which also reveal the interactional work being done in discourse. The analysis of teachers’ interviews, therefore, focused on both the micro and macro features of talk (Potter, 1996). This is in line with the aims of the analysis, which set out to explore the constructive and actionoriented nature of talk (i.e., what is being done in the talk and why) and emphasizes the features of their accounts that reveal how the talk is rhetorically organized to justify certain elements of their provision.

Specifically, the analysis sought to identify the discursive strategies teachers employed in their accounts and the function of those strategies in that discursive context (i.e., to defend, justify their provision), subsequently revealing the way teachers manage issues of stake and accountability.

ANALYSIS

This analysis will focus on three excerpts that highlight the strategies that teachers employed in their attempts to account for their provision as inclusive of young LGB people. The strategies included reinstating the presumption of heterosexuality, problematizing same-sex sexuality, and accounting for inclusivity through focus on homophobia. These strategies ultimately involved constructing young LGB pupils as isolated cases within the school context, which functions to indicate that their SRE needs are outside the remit of mainstream provision. As the question to which they responded implies the importance of providing inclusive provision, teachers invariably sought to respond in a way that presented their provision as fulfilling this (legislative) obligation despite the fact that it did not appear to do so. As such, the analysis presented attempts to highlight how these accounts reflect such concerns, along with the resources teachers used to accomplish inclusive provision and, ultimately, discount heterosexist practice.

Accounting for Inclusivity by Reinstating a Heterosexual Presumption and Problematizing Same-Sex Sexuality

Within teachers’ accounts of their sexual health programs, young people were constructed as almost always heterosexual. While this perception is implicit in much of their descriptions around their provision, it appears more explicitly when accounting for how their provision acknowledges and caters for sexual diversity. Although many of these teachers acknowledge that there may be a number of gay pupils in their classes, given their perceived minority status, these SRE needs appear as secondary to heterosexual pupils. This was most evident where teachers set about constructing certain sexual health imperatives within their provision, namely those related to teenage pregnancy. While this worked to establish danger for the majority, it also provided a means through which to argue that young LGB pupils were anomalous cases. As these teachers are certainly aware of the importance of implementing inclusive provision, they inevitably attempted to highlight how their provision accounts for this, while simultaneously indicating that such provision is not considered to be a staple element of SRE.

Carl: well in terms of the promotion of sort of homo:sexuality and (.)

lesbianism (.) we <do:nt really> get into al:l that (.) its (.)

<something that we sa:y> (1) if you have concerns about it

we have the parachute drop in clinic (1.5) with er:m (3) the

school nurse (.) so if you wanna talk to somebody individually

and on a confidential (.) basis (.) that micro approach of <one

to one>

Interviewer: umm

Carl: is available to ya (.) and we basically ↑sign post them in the right

direction (1) and they within there (.) have got all the literature that you need and so on (1) the ↑problem we:ve got is that you’re dealing at the mac (.) what I call the macro level (.) where you’re teaching thir:ty kids (1) and you’ve only got them for that fifty minutes and you know that you’ve gotta get these key messages out (.hh) so often (2) the concerns of individuals

(.) or the fears that individuals have got (.) you can’t deal with in that allocated time spot (.) (Excerpt 1, pp. 12–13)

In response to a question regarding whether his provision caters for (specifically sexual) diversity, Carl immediately reformulates the nature of this issue as he refers to the inclusion of information for LGB pupils as “promotion” (line 396). By reformulating this as a “promotion” issue, Carl can be seen to be setting up a more suitable position from which to more easily dismiss this as something covered in his provision. Interestingly, the way in which the inclusion of LGB sex and relationships information is framed as the promotion of LGB sexuality is reminiscent of the discourse used within Section 28 and, as such, has dialogical element to it. Here we can see that Carl appears to be orienting to a particular discourse used in previous policy, and one that opens up issues around this aspect of provision. This reformulation then works to downplay both the nature and importance of this information; it suggests that, within this context, promotion would be problematic and inappropriate (as it was indeed classified as such in Section 28). Accordingly, this appears to function as an act of resistance against having to cover this kind of material. Certainly, the fact that Carl’s provision does not include material for LGB individuals suggests that this resistance comes from having to acknowledge this (an undesirable response). This is further highlighted in the nature of this refusal, as it is both vague and dismissive in nature: “we don’t really get into all that” (lines 396–397). Again, the formulation of “all that” is interesting for the way it suggests that aspect of provision is considered separate from SRE and, as such, not considered to be a basic part of young people’s SRE needs. Furthermore, the use of this phrase also suggests that “that” is not something you should wish to get into.

In building justification for why this information is not covered in SRE, note the way Carl constructs an LGB identity as a troubled one, as he constructs these pupils’ need for information only in terms of the concerns they have about their sexuality (line 397). This ignores the many different subject positions of LGB young people and, indeed, their general SRE needs. Most significantly, it sets LGB people up as being in need of specialized and confidential services, which Carl himself prescribes as part of his mainstream provision (line 397–400).

In problematizing the LGB pupil (and, indeed, a non-heterosexual identity), Carl can be seen to be creating important grounds from which to suggest that these pupils need “one-to-one” and “confidential” support (lines 399–400). Also, by making it outside of the SRE teachers’ expertise, Carl is providing important justification for not including this support in the SRE classroom. This is something he frames as being in the pupils’ best interests as it spares these pupils from having to disclose their fears in front of the rest of the class (lines 406–407). In addition, Carl further justifies his decisions in terms of pragmatics: Within this stretch of talk Carl implicates time restrictions as an additional reason why he cannot cover these issues in class, where he states that “key messages” (line 406) have to take priority. Implicit within this remark, however, is the assumption that LGB issues and same-sex sexual practices are not considered to be part of mainstream provision. This is evident where Carl frames the information on same-sex sexuality as relevant only for those who identify as LGB and all pupils. Here Carl produces an account that displays a heterosexual presumption and his relatively limited knowledge around sexuality. This is further highlighted in Carl’s reference to the “macro level” approach (line 404), where the assumption remains that LGB issues are not for the (presumably heterosexual) majority of pupils who therefore do not need to know about non-heterosexual sexual practices.

It is clear from the nature of this account that Carl is attempting to justify what is inherently a lack of provision for LGB pupils within his teaching. As such, the nature of his arguments highlights the rhetorical function of Carl’s account as it works to avoid the implication that his provision is not catering to sexual diversity. The rhetorical nature of this account is most evident from the justification Carl offers when he frames this lack of provision as being in pupils’ best interests. While such a justification could be heard as a particularly noble enterprise, we see that Carl’s commitment to this issue is later undermined within subsequent talk. In this excerpt Carl can be seen to be building further justification around his decision to exclude provision around LGB sexuality.

Carl: who don’t promote it (3) since the repeal (2.5) I wouldn’t say we go and do (.) an open promotion where it’s (.) ah (3) a lesson in itself on homosexuality (.) we don’t (.) we don’t do tha:t (1) what we do (.) as I said (.) as I said earlier (3) it’s alluded (.) >°its not alluded (.) it’s the wrong word<° (.) we signpost the kids (1) in the places where we feel (.) their individual needs can be best met

Interviewer: umm

Carl: they (.) their individual needs expressed within a classroom is

not the best environment to do it

Interviewer: umm

Carl: (5) the notion of (1) I think it comes back to this notion of

confidentiality (.) really and if (4) and if they openly want to

discuss homo-(.) homosexuality and lesbianism and so on (.) I

don’t think the classroom that (.) and the environment that we

have within our school is the best place to do it (.) I think they

ne:ed to be looking at (2) having their views heard (.) and

understood (3) with other people (.) whether its (.) adults (.) or

whether it’s the sixth form peer mentors (.) or what have you

(2) so (3) I dunno it- it’s (.) one of those where (1) the climate

within (2) school maybe different in four five years’ time (.)

where it does become part of (3) a total sex education (2.5)

package if you like (.) °>that’s probably (.) too< (.)°

Interviewer: yeah

Carl: within (.) within that context (2) so I can see it (1) becoming

part and parcel of (2) of the programmes of study (1) but at the

moment (3) that is (4) sign posted elsewhere (.) because we

don’t feel that (.) within the PSE team (.) we’re probably the

best people to deal with the students needs (.) on that (.) on

that basis

Interviewer: yes

Carl: I dunno if that’s (Excerpt 2, pp. 18–19)

In this excerpt Carl can be seen to be building further justification around his decision to exclude provision around LGB sexuality and same-sex sexual practices, in response to an inquiry by the research regarding whether Section 28 affected his teaching practice. In reinforcing this account, Carl builds his justification in an almost identical fashion to that seen in the previous excerpt, where he mobilizes a heterosexual presumption in order to construct young LGB people as not only isolated but also specialist cases (based on their perceived minority status) that require specialist services. We can see most clearly where the decision to “signpost” pupils with concerns over their sexual identity is again framed in terms of the pupils’ best interests (lines 597–607). Although the justification offered is not new, how he goes on to account for their exclusion is. Here we can see that the omission of LGB sexuality in the classroom is justified through claims that this provision is beyond the SRE teachers’ expertise. While the issue of confidentiality is mobilized as a way of further strengthening this approach (line 603), it is here where Carl actually undermines his claims that this happens in the pupils’ best interests. Contrary to earlier claims that the redirection of pupils to external services is based on concerns over confidentiality and expertise, he downgrades those who are qualified to deal with these pupils, emphasizing anyone else other than the SRE teacher instead: “whether it’s adults or whether it’s the sixth form peer mentors or what have you” (lines 607–608). Despite strong rhetoric around pupils’ best interests, the issue of LGB sexuality thus appears to be problematic for the SRE classroom and is not considered to be a staple element of young people’s SRE entitlement. While this method of dealing with pupils who deviate from the heterosexual norm is based on their exclusion from provision, here it is justified as a method that ensures inclusivity.

In fashioning this justification in this way, we can see it functions as a means of presenting Carl as sensitive to pupils’ needs and not unresponsive to diversity issues. In line with many discursive studies around racism and sexism, this highlights the way that speakers manage talk to portray themselves as caring and egalitarian (Billig, 1991; Edwards, 2000; Potter & Wetherell, 1992). This account of omissions in provision can be seen as a strategic method for managing issues of stake and what may be construed as potentially heterosexist talk. As an SRE coordinator and, indeed, an advisor to other schools, Carl is aware of the importance of accounting for what are considered to be elements of good practice in SRE. This is why his talk evidences various attempts at managing his response in a way that ensures it is rhetorically persuasive.

Accounting for Inclusivity in Terms of Work Done on Homophobia

In a similar vein, when accounting for their SRE provision as inclusive of sexual diversity, many teachers did so by referring to their work on homo-phobia, particularly the emphasis placed on changing intolerance among young (heterosexual) people. Within these justifications, they mobilized a discourse of fixity in sexual identity through the inference of a heterosexual/ homosexual binary. Through these accounts, then, teachers continued to mobilize a heterosexual presumption within SRE provision, where SRE appears to reinforce non-heterosexuality as a minority issue.

Similarly to Carl, Heather also accounts for inclusivity in her provision, but she does so by drawing on the work she carries out around homophobia. The general level of intolerance around gay sexuality among pupils also appeared to be a concern in Heather’s accounts. In dealing with this climate of intolerance around gay sexuality, a discourse of fixity in sexual identity is used not only as a means for young people to understand sexual orientation but also more strategically, as a basis from which teachers attempt to reduce homophobia.

Heather: yeah I do do yeah (.) sort of a focus of a lesson and I look at

(.hh) erm stereotypical views (.) so I just take some

really horrible quotations that you know (.) and we look at

them (.hh) and we talk about why people might say things

like that (.) so (.) you know (.) that often says “oooo” and

they think they don’t say things like that but in another

context I know that they probably do and maybe have (.)

do you know what I mean? so I think sometimes you’ve got

to (.hh) you can’t run away from it can you? I think you do

have to face up (.) erm (.) and I know that in another school

(.hh) a colleague went to visit and she’d gone into a year

seven lesson and she sa < I mean they were dealing with

homophobia i:n year seven so the kids were just fantastic about

it you know (.hh) erm whereas (2) I think you know some of

ours are n:ot (1) erm but you’ve got to work at it haven’t you?

And I think a lot of the things that you do in PSHE (.hh) are sort

of you chip away a little bit (.) do you know what I mean?

Interviewer: yes

Heather: I think ones of the things we talk about quit- you know in year

ten< is one of the things they find really hard is that (.) people

don’t choose to be (1) but they are and I try to make that very

clear- (.) do you know what I mean?

Interviewer: Yeah

Heather: and I think they just think oh well no (.) coz its (.) and they

find that re:ally ha:rd (.hh) where as with the younger ones

erm I know there’s an exercise we do from that of the roll

ercoaster pack (.) I dunno if you’ve seen that

Interviewer: oh right no I haven’t

Heather: and that’s from the sexual health centre (.hh) erm and its really

about puberty (.) and there’s some little cards sort of trouble

with teenagers and one girl feels a really strong attach- attrac

tion to her friend and one of the things (.hh) in early puberty is

that you can feel a very strong attraction to (.hh) the same sex

as well as the opposite sex (.) It doesn’t necessarily me:an that

you are lesbian or whatever (.hh) but I think later on (.) you’ve

got to deal with the issue (.) differently you know as girls get

older so (.hh) erm so I think that’s probably one of the ones

that is is (.) more tr:icky (.) erm to [deal with]

Interviewer: [yeah I think

Heather: er but again I try to sort of take guidance on you know what

current thought is and how you should be dealing with these

issues so (.hh) (Excerpt 3, pp. 9–10)

Within this excerpt we can see that Heather responds to the question of whether her provision caters for LGB pupils by describing a lesson she delivers on homophobia, with emphasis on the types of activities and discussions that take place within these lessons. We can see that this talk serves to establish the importance of these lessons. The promotional nature of this sequence of talk is evident in the rhetorical questions Heather poses, the function of which serves to emphasize the importance of this type of work: (“so I think sometimes you’ve got to you can’t run away from it can you,” lines 335–336; “erm but you’ve got to work at it haven’t you?;” line 340). The use of rhetorical questions employed by speakers as an effective persuasive device is well established within the literature (Frank, 1990; Ilie, 1994). In this case, these questions serve as a subtle but persuasive means of emphasizing her commitment to the issue of homophobia in direct response to queries regarding the inclusivity of her provision. As we can see, the effect of these questions depends on a shared sense of agreement on the importance of this issue (working hard at tackling homophobia) between Heather and the interviewer. The use of the phrases such as “work at it” and “can’t run away from it” highlights their rhetorical effect and their use here as felicitous (Rohde, 2006). Essentially, these rhetorical questions have an important communicative function here as they follow an admission that there is a problem with homo-phobia. They essentially work to soften Heather’s admission of an undesirable element of her provision or at least an undesirable aspect of her pupils’ attitudes. Overall, however, it highlights the way in which Heather is building important justification for this work done on homophobia.

The importance and success of this work is also clarified by Heather’s reference to the success of another school, where the approach involved tackling homophobic attitudes at an earlier age, rendering the issue of same-sex sexuality and sexual practices as normative to these pupils (lines 338–339). Here, Heather seeks to emphasize the exceptional nature of this provision as it features as early as year 7. The nature of this talk highlights the fact that dealing with homophobia at an early age is considered the exception with SRE provision rather than the rule. It also functions as a means of bolstering the importance of this aspect of provision; it establishes this issue as difficult and pervasive among young people. This is further illustrated by Heather’s comment in line 341, which emphasizes that producing change on this may be a slow and arduous process: “you chip away a little bit.”

To further emphasize the importance of addressing homophobia, Heather also makes a number of claims regarding why young people are homophobic. Here, the issue of fixity in sexual identity becomes pertinent in lines 343–345, where Heather asserts that young people struggle with understanding gay sexuality. While this is presented as a pupil concern, it is also appears as a point of educating young people about sexuality (lines 344–346). Thus, within this stretch of talk lies the assumption of fixity in sexual identity (heterosexual/homosexual binary) based on an understanding of sexuality as biologically determined. The focus within Heather’s provision, then, becomes about building an argument for biological determinism of sexuality and sub-sequent fixity in sexual identity as a means of negotiating, convincing, and changing young people’s minds. This way of educating young people centers on a discourse of tolerance gained through establishing cause (and removing choice) rather than through one that emphasizes acceptance on the grounds of diversity. This argument is often used in the political sphere in the formulation of arguments for equality and comes at the expense of those that emphasize choice, freedom, and values (Waites, 2005).

Heather’s subsequent talk further problematizes gay sexuality where she refers to an activity used to explore the temporary nature of same-sex attraction in adolescence (lines 353–357). The importance of what these feelings may mean for young people is apparent here, and it reasserts the hetero-sexual presumption. The issue of gay sexuality as problematic is implicit here, particularly through reassurance of their heterosexuality. In this instance, any inconsistent (same-sex) feelings are explained away as a momentary lapse or as misplaced feelings.

As Heather’s talk functions to establish a need for the work she does on homophobia, we can see that this is used to account for how her provision caters to LGB pupils. By accounting for inclusivity in this way, her talk primarily acknowledges issues related to sexual identity (but notably only for those who are heterosexual) as opposed to matters around sex and relationships. Interestingly, this then functions to desexualize LGB people as it fails to acknowledge their sexual practices and desires. Of course, this is problematic in this context as it continues to reinforce the notion that this information should be outside of the remit of provision.

DISCUSSION

Our intention with this article was to examine how teachers account for inclusivity and, more specifically, pupils’ sexual diversity within their SRE provision. This focus helps to highlight some of the barriers that prevent inclusivity being realized, particularly at the level of the individual educator and those that relate to the cultural context of heterosexism. The findings mirror previous research documenting the predominantly heterosexist nature of SRE (Ellis & High, 2004; Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Stonewall, 2007). Additionally, this research highlights the way in which teachers attempt to account for their provision largely with rhetorical claims that appear to be inclusive of young people’ sexual diversities but that actually prevent this due to their heterosexist nature.

The analysis revealed how teachers employed a number of strategies to present their provision as inclusive, but each of these constructed young LGB people and those who engage in same-sex sexual practices as isolated cases and therefore outside of the remit of mainstream SRE provision. These strategies used involve reinforcing the presumption of heterosexuality, problematizing same-sex sexuality, and accounting for inclusivity, but only with reference to homophobia. As part of this, teachers reinforce a hetero/homo binary and promote fixity of sexual identity as a basis from which to tackle homophobia. As we can see, these strategies of accounting (and justification) effectively deny the idea that their provision may be heterosexist and invariably function to “explain away” issues around same-sex sexuality as a key part of provision. It is clear that barriers such as this prevent inclusive (and therefore comprehensive) provision. An example of this is when teachers mobilized heterosexual presumptions to uphold heteronormative provision, positioning LGB pupils as isolated cases. This effectively rebutted any notion of possible omissions in their provision and allowed them to be seen as responding to the needs of the majority.

While this accounting practice functioned to position LGB pupils outside of the concerns of staple provision, it also served to establish them as needing alternative and specialized provision. Teachers therefore appeared to conflate LGB pupils’ sexual identity with their SRE needs, and, more problematically, this was achieved in a way that ensured LGB pupils experienced their sexual identity negatively. This then appeared to create an effective position from which to justify excluding this provision as it constructed these pupils’ needs as being outside of the SRE teacher (and the classroom).

Additionally, rhetoric around homophobia was another accounting device deployed by teachers. One teacher accounted for inclusivity by specifically referencing provision focusing on homophobia. Again, while this is deployed as a means of representing LGB pupils, it fails to address their SRE needs. In each of these cases, it is clear that these claims toward inclusivity appear to be strategies employed by teachers to justify and defend their SRE practice. Despite clear claims for inclusivity, however, there is a lack of SRE provision focusing on sexual health and practices within same-sex relation-ships. The strong rhetoric specifying “pupil best interests” merely functions as a way of legitimizing the existing heteronormative content of provision. Arguably, teachers’ claims of inclusivity are therefore rhetorically produced to meet the demands of the interaction — in this case, discounting claims that they are unresponsive to pupils’ needs.

These findings appear to highlight a lack of understanding around what constitutes real inclusivity within the context of SRE. Certainly, as it is currently articulated there are problems in both acknowledging and addressing young people’s diverse SRE needs, given that they are set among provision that privileges heterosexuality above other types of sexual identity and practice. This clearly has significant implications regarding the potential efficacy of SRE provision.

As highlighted in the analysis, it is clear that young people are taught about sexuality predominantly under a discourse of sexual fixity (hetero/homo binary). SRE provision needs to incorporate the increasing variability and fluidity of young people’s sexual identities and practices (Dempsey, Hillier, & Harrison, 2001; Diamond & Butterworth, 2008; Jackson, 2004). As it stands, current provision proscribes information on the basis that their (hetero)sexuality does not change; moreover, it makes certain assumptions around the types of sexual practices young people engage in. This is problematic for young people who move between sexual identities or relinquish them all together. As such, SRE needs to promote the plurality in sexuality by including a wider range of sexual practices outside of penis-in-vagina sex such as anal sex, oral sex, and different types of masturbation. This will prevent the conflation of sexual activity with penis-in-vagina sex only and open up the discourses used in teachers’ communications with pupils. Teachers will therefore need to be more open about discussing sex, which should be fostered through ongoing training around SRE and through support from senior management. This is in line with the idea of creating a non discriminatory climate that is acknowledged by all members of staff (Mayo, 2013).

Also highlighted in the analysis is the importance of examining how provision is constituted at a discursive level. The discursive barriers in teachers’ accounts that prevent inclusivity and contribute toward the aforementioned inequality in provision are particularly subtle and thus require close scrutiny. These inquiries will allow us to challenge instances of heterosexism and promote awareness of how teachers’ discourses affect young people’s developing sexualities. The implications of heteronormative provision for young people are significant (Atkinson, 2002; Ellis & High, 2004; McLoughlin, 2008). Teachers’ discourse has the potential to establish the many possibilities of sexual desire, practice, and thought for young people at an influential time in their sexual development. If LGB sexuality and sexual health are considered peripheral or outside the staple concerns of SRE, then those who identify as LGB will fail to receive any SRE provision that matches their experiences. Additionally, it also closes off a range of sexual practices and desires that young people may currently engage in irrespective of sexual identity. Certainly, the effects of delivering SRE within an essentialist model of sexuality will not sufficiently represent all young people’s current sexual experiences. Teaching SRE under a more pluralistic understanding of sexual activity, of course, requires more understanding around such issues for teachers who currently understand and teach sexuality under the framework of sexual essentialism. This has important implications for the types of strategies they use for reducing homophobia that currently rely on these arguments, which in turn works to reinforce a hetero/homo binary and promote fixity of sexual identity.

The findings of this research warrant the need for teachers to reflect on all aspects of their SRE practice and discourse. This will enable teachers to identify more limiting discourses and reflect on any assumptions mobilized in their provision. Such reflection may not be easy, particularly for those responsible for SRE, many of which have an external responsibility around regional practice. It is crucial, however, that time is spent reflecting and (regularly) updating their knowledge on sex, sexuality, and young people through avenues such as training and workshops. Such training is crucial in order to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills to develop an inclusive curriculum that takes account of young people’s varying sexual identities, relationships, and cultural backgrounds. Teachers need to be aware of the various ways in which they can promote inclusivity around sexuality, such as using resources that represent sexual diversities. Teachers also need to be aware of the various ways of avoiding imposing heteronormalizing practices through the use of inclusive terminology. Examples include using terms such as partner instead of boyfriend or girlfriend and by using a more general definition of “sexual activity” rather than using sex synonymously with sexual intercourse. All this, however, needs to be developed and supported through specialist training.

Individuals at policy level play a crucial role in establishing a clear curriculum framework from which teachers can gain clarity and confidence. The importance in establishing statutory SRE becomes crucial here for supporting those who deliver provision. Statutory status would certainly ensure a greater number of policy recommendations, particularly those that aim to acknowledge young people’s sexual diversities be translated into practice. This is especially crucial in light of teachers’ strong rhetoric and tendency to discount any suggestion that their provision could be improved.

In focusing on how teachers organize their discourse around sexual diversity, the present article highlights the subtle arguments used to uphold heteronormative provision and the failure to follow policy recommendations regarding inclusivity within the school context. Most significantly, these findings highlight the way that policy recommendations can be so easily dismissed under provision that is not statutory. Together, these two issues continue to undermine the establishment of provision that is inclusive of the needs of non-heterosexual people and practices.

NOTES

1. One of the two main political parties (the Conservative Party and the Labour Party) that have dominated British politics and that have alternated in government over the last 90 years. The Conservative government is the center right political party associated with traditionalist values, as opposed to the Labour Party, who espouse more socialist principles.

2. The Equality Act (2010) covers the way the curriculum is delivered, and, as such, schools must ensure equal opportunities in the education they provide and prohibits schools from discriminating against pupils because of their sex, race, disability, religion or belief, and sexual orientation.

3. The Learning and Skills Act (2000) states that “young people learn about the nature of marriage and its importance for family life and bringing up children” and “protected from teaching and materials which are inappropriate, having regard to the age and the religious and cultural background of the pupils concerned” (2000, p. 148).

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