

'I'm just a home economics teacher'.

***Does discipline background impact on teacher's ability to
affirm and include gender and sexual diversity in secondary
school health education programs?***

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Paper Presented at the AARE Conference Melbourne November 2004

Abstract

Secondary school health and sexuality education teachers find it difficult to recognise and affirm sexual diversity. Overwhelmingly teachers of sexuality education in Australia are drawn from the physical education, home economics and science disciplines with a declining sprinkle of teachers with a gender equity background. They have little background and training in sexuality education, are concerned about attitudes and backlash and are often reluctant to teach the more sensitive issues, particularly issues around gender and homosexuality. Without formal or academic studies in sexuality education teachers' undergraduate discipline training is likely to have impacted on how they position issues of gender and sexuality in their programs.

This paper reports on qualitative data from research into changes in classroom practice for teachers of sexuality and health education. Its focus is the impact of professional development and the provision of a teaching and learning resource called Talking Sexual Health. This resource is designed to provide teachers with the necessary background, knowledge and skills thought to be effective in assisting them to include and affirm gender and sexual diversity as part of secondary school health education programs. I show that while discipline background is an important consideration in positioning some issues, particularly around gender and power, its impact has far less importance in positioning issues of sexual diversity.

Introduction

Twenty years ago I completed a unit in sexuality as a part of a Bachelor of Education. One of assessment tasks was a 2000 word paper. There were three choices as I recall but I can only remember the one I selected, although they were all similarly confronting. The one I choose was 'I would prefer to be caught having sex than masturbating'. Many of you probably teach pre-service health education students and couldn't imagine setting such an essay topic; I find it hard to believe myself. What is more remarkable though, is that this unit was part of my home economics degree.

I am a home economics teacher. I was trained in the early 1980's. I was unique because I was also training be a physical education teacher. At the time I was moving between two campuses. On one campus I was referred to as a 'scone cutter' at the other campus 'a jock'. One campus was a 19th century mansion that was used many years early to train girls in domestic service and from the stories I have heard from my older colleagues they also received very good tuition in cooking and cleaning. The other campus was a 1960's teacher's college equipped with student café, student union, drugs, alcohol, men and mirrors in the gym so you could watch yourself and others do weigh training. As you can imagine the 'multiply understandings' of myself were operative during these years. The discourses that underpinned the content of the courses and the pedagogy used to instruct in these areas were as diverse as the students who were studying each discipline.

Health and sexuality education is predominantly taught by teachers whose undergraduate degree is made up of one these two discipline background, many of them trained during the 1980's (Rosenthal and Anderson 1995). The influence of discipline background is bound to have some impact on the discourse teacher's have access to and use to understand and address issues in health education. The unit I referred to in the introduction was a semester long unit that was very extensive and covered integrated many of the more sensitive sexuality issues, such sexual attraction, homosexuality, sexual pleasure and disability, gender and violence etc. It was also a unit of self discovery. I remember many disclosures and tears as the participants struggled with their personal understandings and experience of sexuality. I relate this story because it sets the context of the paper I am giving today. I also study sexuality

as part of my physical education degree but this was a very different experience. Sexuality was presented as a series of topics to be covered in health. It was a bio-medical and factual exploration of sexuality and at no time did we explore personal and social understandings and interpretations of sexuality.

Does being trained as a home economics teacher rather than a physical education teacher or any other discipline, for that matter, impact on provision and delivery of health education or on teachers' preparedness and ability to up take new ways of seeing and delivery health education to students? This is one of the questions to which my research is concerned. More specifically my research has been exploring how you bring about change in teacher practice so teachers feel able and confident to address sexual diversity, gender and power.

The purpose of this paper today is to explore a couple of the themes emerging in my data in relation to teachers' understandings and positioning to issues of gender and sexual diversity.

The research

The data I'm going to present today comes from work in process towards my PhD thesis which is concerned with change in teacher practice in the classroom and is obviously examining more than discipline background. The study is a summative evaluation focused on whether a resource called *Talking Sexual Health (TSH)*, (developed with the intention of bringing about this change), had any impact on change in teacher practice.

Talking Sexual Health

During 1999-2000 the Commonwealth government funded the development of the set of resources with the broad intention of improving student knowledge of STI's and blood Borne viruses as a response to early findings of a survey secondary school students' knowledge, behaviour, attitudes to sexual health (Lindsay et al 1998), and in recognition that these issues need to be addressed in the context of a broad health and

sexuality education background (ANCAHRD1999). Called *Talking Sexual Health*, the resources have four components, the first of these is a framework designed to assist systems and sectors to recognize and address sexuality issues including sexual diversity in policy and program development (Australian National Council for AIDs, Hepatitis C and Related Diseases 1999). To implement the framework a professional development resource (ANCAHRD 2000) has been developed which includes a significant focus on gender, power and sexual diversity. Educational personnel, consultants and agencies that provide professional development for teachers have been trained in most states and territories. A classroom resource has also been developed to use in the classroom with students (ANCAHRD 2001). This also has a focus on addressing issues of gender, power and sexual diversity. To support the role of parents as the primary site of sexuality education a parent's resource has been developed for distribution through parents' organizations or schools (ANCAHRD1999).

Teacher professional development and access to classroom resources are regularly argued to be the key to teacher change in practice in sexuality education (Health Canada 1994, Harrison et al, 1998; Australian National Council for AIDs, Hepatitis C and Related Diseases; 1999; McKay et al, 1999; Warwick et al, 2001). Until the publication of *TSH* there were very few Australian and less overseas classroom teaching resources or professional programs that focused on the issue of sexual diversity. Australia now has both. They are based on the latest research and pedagogical practice. They have been endorsed by all states and territory education authorities and have been scrutinized by an extensive national reference group (Australian National Council for AIDs, Hepatitis C and Related Diseases 2000). So from all accounts it could legitimately be assumed that they will have an impact on practice. The impact of these resources is the subject matter my PhD. Specifically the study examines the implications on practice of teachers being provided with professional development and classroom resources designed to assist them to affirm sexual diversity in their school based programs.

The Research Process

The research process involved a sample of 15 Victorian Secondary teachers currently teaching health education. These teachers undertook a 2-day professional development intervention designed to provide knowledge, skills and understandings that was thought to be effective in equipping them to include and affirm gender and sexual diversity and use the *TSH* classroom resource.

A multi-method strategy was adopted, incorporating interviews, classroom observations and analysis of course outlines and curricula in three phases over an 18-month period. The first phase occurred prior to any professional development and was designed to examine their understandings and approaches to sexuality, pedagogy, gender and sexual diversity. The second phase immediately followed the professional development and canvassed changes in understanding and approaches. Teachers were also given the accompanying teaching and learning resource. The third and final phase took place between 12-18 months after the 2-day workshop and examined sustainable change.

This paper reports on the first phase of data collection. It presents two case studies that document teachers' understandings and positioning to issues of gender and sexual diversity prior to any involvement in professional development. The first one is Mandy, an experienced and qualified health education teacher with a home economics background. The second is Allan an inexperienced and unqualified health education teacher with a physical education background.

Mandy: Experienced and Qualified: A home economics perspective

Mandy represents the many home economics teachers who have been instrumental in the development and coordination of health education programs in schools over the past 20 years. Although home economics teachers are a diminishing group due to

changes to undergraduate teaching programs, they remain a distinctive and influential group of almost exclusively women teachers involved in sexuality education.

Mandy is 34 years old. She has been teaching in Victorian government secondary schools for 12 years and currently teaches in the outer east of Melbourne. Mandy trained as a home economics teacher in the mid to late 1980's and undertook a major in health education that included a human relationships and sexuality subject. This makes her one of a small group of teachers with formal undergraduate training in health education, including sexuality education. Mandy is an experienced health and sexuality teacher, having developed her current course and taught it for past 12 years. Although Mandy wants to address sexual diversity and can see a real need she is reluctant to make it a formal part of her curriculum for fear of student readiness and relevance.

Gender and power

Mandy has a sound knowledge about sexuality and the issues for young people. She is aware of the need to examine gender and to include some material on same sex attraction. However her understanding of gender centers on a strong commitment to two opposite and fixed notions of man/woman, with a clear project of getting students to examine the gender stereotypes associated with these. These notions are never questioned. According to Mandy *...I think it's really important, yeah and I think it's important that kids understand about stereotypes associated with gender and expectations from society* (Mandy, phase 1 interview 2002).

The way that she did this in practice was to get the students to look at the roles men and women play by asking students in small single sex groups to list the advantages and disadvantages of being men and women. Students were required to fill in a sheet and report back to the large group. This was followed by a work sheet called 'Sex-role stereotypes', which examined sex roles stereotyping. The responses made by the students included

Characteristic responses by girls

- Advantages of being a female – looking after children, cooking, shopping don't go to war, good taste in clothes and fashion
- Disadvantages of being a female- strength, cost of hair cuts, cook a lot, parents stricter, services more expensive, less freedom
- Advantages of being a male - fixing things, building things, can't control temper
- Disadvantages of being a male- can't control temper, not allowed to show emotion, not spending much time with the kids

Characteristic responses by boys

- Advantages of being a male - fixing things, building things, power, strength, cheaper services, job opportunities
 - Disadvantages of being a male- outside work, out late regularly, careless with housework, earning money, to war
 - Advantages of being a female - careful with children and the house, lady go first, easy to talk to
 - Disadvantages of being a female - period, angry
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Mandy positioned herself with the girls, assuming homogeneity, by constantly affirming the girls' responses as truth. As she noted them on the board she acknowledged her own experience of these roles at the same time as commenting on the sexist nature of some of the responses by the boys. She tried to use the students' responses to get them to see that these are 'what we call stereotypes', not reality. This did not work well. The students' responses were glossed over and although the students raised issues about power, strength, job opportunities, freedom, these were not discussed or referred to.

Language

Although offended by sexist language and behaviour, my observation of Mandy's teaching indicated that most of the time it was ignored along with other derogatory comments. Mandy says she doesn't like to *'make a big deal'* if students use the word gay. She says she tries *'to let them know that it's probably not an appropriate term, because it probably doesn't make a person feel comfortable being called that. And you know you've got to acknowledge it without making a big fuss of it'*. (Phase 1 interview)

In one class a male student made the comment that 'if boys like cooking and housework then people think they are a 'poofta'. The teacher affirmed the student's observation by saying 'yes, if men like these things then they are assumed to be a 'poofta' or gay'. She also said she was surprised that students hadn't made this connection before. She didn't pick up on the use of the derogatory language 'poofta' and actually used it herself, positioning homosexuality in a negative discourse. Her response reinforced that there was something abnormal about being gay or liking cooking or housework if you're male.

Sexual diversity

Considering the unitary way that Mandy positions gender, she shows a remarkably dynamic and affirming understanding of sexual diversity and sexual attraction. She talks about sexuality as fluid rather than fixed, '*lots of kids are attracted to people of the same sex as well as the opposite sex*'; and acknowledges the influence of social construction on sexuality as she questions the impact of expectations. '*I think that as they get older, they probably ... I don't know, society expects them to be attracted to the opposite sex and so that's the way they are*'; an understanding she does not voice about gender.

Although her attitude and understanding of same-sex attraction is supportive, Mandy is honest in her assessment of the personal challenges she feels by including and affirming sexual diversity in the curriculum and more broadly in the school environment. This is illustrated in her positioning of sexual intimacy. When asked how she would feel and what she would do if she found two year 12 boys kissing at school Mandy acknowledges shock to be her initial reaction, '*I'd just ... after I got over the initial shock because it would be a shock I think, I'd probably just ask them ... I'd say it wasn't appropriate and ask them to sort of move along, yeah*' (Phase 1 interview).

Whereas shock was the initial response to the same sex couple, when a similar situation was presented to her in relation to an opposite sex attracted couple her response is both comfortable and blasé, '*it doesn't really bother me*' and her concerns

center on inappropriateness of place, namely school, what level of intimacy they are engaging in and their visibility.

This is on the oval, underneath some trees? I'm thinking I don't really mind, it doesn't really bother me as long as they're not going too far and if people can't really see (Mandy Phase 1 interview 2002).

Mandy positions heterosexuality as normal, comfortable and expected compared to shock, discomfort and difference evidenced in her response to the young men. The right to display heterosexual intimacy is not questioned rather it is only where the intimacy is occurring that concerns her.

She is reluctant to cover issues of same sex attraction overtly because of perceived backlash from parents and the idea that the students are too 'innocent'. She positions issues around sexual diversity, particularly homosexuality, in the types of discourses that Harrison and Hillier (2004) call 'oppressive discourses around sexuality and gender' (p 81), discourses of 'difference' and 'disease' with no inclusive strategies used. Mandy says if sexual diversity is covered in the curriculum it is done so '*separately... yeah, it's sort of a bit separate*, illustrating a discourse of 'other and different'. Mandy acknowledges that this approach is problematic and doesn't feel completely comfortable, however she justifies on the basis that '*the majority aren't same sex attracted so we sort of teach to the majority I guess. Yeah, I know, I don't like that*'.

A discourse of disease is the other 'oppressive' discourse Mandy draws on, equating homosexuality with AIDS.

...we talk about how male homosexuals have got ... how AIDS has been so well publicised and they've got quite a bit of funding towards it and why is that so, and we look at ... you know, there's strong lobby groups, that's in Year Ten. Lobby groups who are pushing the issue and why aren't other health issues ... why don't they maintain the big focus that AIDS does and yeah, we talk about it in terms of that but that would be the only time I think, yeah (Phase 1 interview 2002).

Her comment also illustrates a level of underlying discomfort and negativity in her reference to homosexual ‘lobby groups’ getting funding when other health issues do not.

Allan: An unlikely conscript: A Physical Education Teacher perspective.

By far the largest group of teachers who teach health and sexuality education is those with a physical education background (Rosenthal et al 2000). As this study is indicating, school administrators make the assumption that these teachers are qualified to teach sexuality. The reality is that while some are, many are not. Allan represents the growing number of unqualified and inexperienced physical education teachers expected to teach sexuality by virtue of belonging to the health and physical education learning area. Choosing Allan as the case study for this paper was not easy because the dominant group of health education teachers involved in this study are experienced, some qualified, many not, female teachers. I decided that Allan’s journey could offer more to the study. He is one of only three males involved in the study and although he volunteered he did so as a result of pressure from another colleague. Allan trained as a physical education teacher during the 1970’s at a time when he had what Bob Connell 1995, refers to as an *‘unchallengeable claim to masculinity of the physical kind’* (p.156). The influence of this on Allan and his position and attitudes to homosexuality, gender and sexual diversity has the potential to provide important insights into the impact of professional

Allan is characteristic of many male physical education teachers in Victorian secondary schools. He is 46 years old and has been teaching for 23 years as a physical education and sport coordinator in the Western suburbs of Melbourne. Allan is trained in physical education and has only been teaching health education as a distinct subject for the past few years and sexuality education only in the past few months. He has no formal qualifications beyond being a physical education teacher, nor any desire to teach health. Like many physical education teachers he has done no professional

development in sexuality education. He feels he doesn't have the knowledge and skills to teach sexuality education and although gender, power and sexual diversity are part of his written curriculum he believes in letting the students direct the classes and he avoids including it.

Gender and Power

'Male, female', is Allan's simplistic response to the question, what do you understand by the concept of gender? When probed on the implications of this for sexuality education he maintained, *it's very hard to pigeonhole male and female sexuality because males would have some female "traits" and females some male traits but they're still biologically male and female. It's just that they might have some different traits (Phase 1).*

Allan's response is a biological one with little reflection on the social understandings, patterns and context of genders. Allan talks about 'traits' as if they exist in the same way as genetic traits like eye colour do. Even so, Allan does recognise that there is some social context to gendered behaviour

the boys are a bit more bravado and trying to protect their sexuality or wherever, whereas a lot of the girls are more open, or some of the girls are more open and talk about it, whereas some other girls won't say a word...The boys are pretty black and white though I suppose I was a bit like that myself and might still be (Allan, Phase 1 interview)..

During the two classes I observed Allan was showing an Australian movie called *Shame* (which is 20 years old). This film shows the rape of a girl by a group of boys in country NSW. It focuses on the role of a woman lawyer who happens to be in the town at the time of the rape and her role in bringing the boys to justice. The purpose of the video is to examine the area of gender and violence and the gender bias inherent in the social and legal system when women try to take rape cases to court.

Allan found this material challenging and completely ignored the gendered nature or examination of gender, violence and power. He asked the students to focus on the

father's reaction to the rape and of the mother of one of the offending boys, a boy who came from a rich and powerful family in the town. Allan's teaching and learning approach did not give the students any opportunity to explore the impact and outcome of the rape on the young woman. Below is a copy of what the students were supposed to focus on and discuss. Allan asked the students, however, to focus on question 5 and 7, completely ignoring those questions that required a gender analysis of power and violence.

The students were given the following instructions on a worksheet

Discussion: "The rape of Lizzie touches off an incredible variety of attitudes and emotions amongst the people in the town. What are they? Include Dianna's. Why do you think this is?"

Questions to answer in the workbooks

1. What did you think of the young men in the town?
2. What did you think of the young women and the older people?
3. What do you think the character of Diana is showing us?
4. What about the police in the town? What was their role?
5. Does violence breed violence?
6. Why did Dina get involved?
7. What did you think of the character of Lizzie's father?

Quotes "You got what was coming slut" said by a woman in the supermarket

"Tell him I'm not a slut"

"Something has got into then women"

(Year 10 video analysis Phase 1)

There were several gendered statements made by the students, which had the potential to open up the discussion. One Lebanese boy said, "*Rape doesn't happen in Lebanon because of the religion*". Rather than using this to explore the nature of rape, Allan said nothing. Another boy said '*How could they rape her, she was ugly?*' This was another comment that could have provided the opportunity to explore the connection between gender, power and rape. Allan replied, *don't think that's important, its not part of the movie*'.

Language

Allan has two ways of dealing with inappropriate language. One is to ignore it and the other is to turn the language back on the students as a put down. During a class I was observing a couple of boys were heard by all to say 'fishy bitch', 'and 'fucking hell'. This language was ignored because according to Allan *'you can use whatever language you like if you're comfortable with it but not against anyone. ...And it's okay to use that language in describing something but not calling someone a dyke or whatever if the language isn't referring to anyone'*.

Sexual diversity

Sexual diversity is an area that Allan acknowledges he lacks comfort, knowledge and the skills to cover. When questioned about this he is quick to acknowledge his personal shortcomings *'No, no, I haven't touched on that and that might be because of my own upbringing'*. He open and honest about his own positioning towards homosexuality and maintains that he has modified his attitude over time.

I'm thinking, you know, different blokes, different stroke with ... that's up to them. I've probably changed my thinking over the last maybe ten years, particularly the last five, teaching health education and ... like, when I was at another school, this sort of homosexuality between the male staff was rife and I wasn't too keen on that at all but I've probably become more tolerant and I think society's become more tolerant so you know, even in the class when kids talk about poofers or homos or whatever, I've sort of ... jump on that a bit, tell them to be tolerant and accept people as they are and if they're not affecting you, well they're not a problem (Phase 1 interview).

Allan's attitude toward homosexuality is one expressed by many teachers and often found in school-based policies. It includes the notion that it is important and a 'good thing' to *'be tolerant and accept people as they are and if they're not affecting you, well they're not a problem'*. On closer reading this statement includes, according to Riddle (1984), negative attitudes to homosexuality not the positive attitudes Allan thinks he is displaying for the students. They are patronizing and position sexual

diversity in negative discourses of 'other' and 'different' and therefore not as good. By telling the students they need to be tolerant, Allan is also positioning himself as the one to with the power to accept or rejection (Riddle 1984).

Another illustration of this positioning is the difference in his reaction to finding a SSAY couple kissing and his reaction to finding an OSAY couple kissing is a similar situation. In relation to the SSAY couple he says *'I don't know, I'm probably feeling shock'*. Whereas with the OSAY couple his response was *'Oh, I'm thinking it's probably pretty normal'*. Again he uses the word normal to position homosexual as 'other' and different and not normal. He goes on to talk about how knowing the students or their sexuality would affect his reaction.

It might depend a bit on the kids and probably I'd had some preconceived ideas about these two kids and whether it was that they were attracted to each other or one might be the star footballer and the other one might be a computer nut or whatever, you know. I'd probably have some preconceived ideas about the two kids for a start probably if I'd been there a while and knew them and I'd probably still be in shock (Phase 1 interview).

The way he positions the young men in this comment as the 'star footballer' and 'computer nut' give real insight into this connection. He would be far more shocked if 'the star footballer' was homosexual whereas he might expect it from 'the computer nut'. Clearly bringing into focus his position, that footballers are 'real heterosexual men', whereas, it wouldn't be a surprise for the 'computer nut to turn out gay because a computer nut is equal to not being a real man so therefore possibly homosexual.

Discussion

The challenges facing Mandy and Allan in providing teaching and learning experiences for students that affirm and include gender and sexual diversity raised in this paper reflect those facing the majority of teachers in this study and are consistent with available research (cf Rodriguez et al 1996, Harrison et al 1998, 2000, McKay et al 1999, Warrick et al 2001). Although there are differences in the personal and professional understandings and positioning of sexual diversity and gender, most

notably the impact of Mandy's prior learning in gender theory and practice, characteristic of the 'sex role theory studies in home economics, and Allan's biological approach to gender, there are a number of consistent themes facing current teachers of sexuality education regardless of their discipline background. In many cases level of experience, formal qualifications, confidence and comfort impact on their ability to include and affirm gender and sexual diversity. Although Mandy voiced a supportive position to sexual diversity in reality her lack of comfort resulted in her approach being exclusive.

The teachers either fail to see the gendered nature of social life, such as Allan or position gender relations in narrow and limiting frameworks as did Mandy. Power is conspicuous by its absence in any analysis of gender and sexuality.

These data have shown that the inclusion and affirmation of sexual diversity provides one of the greatest challenges for the teachers involved in this study. In both cases the inclusion of sexual diversity was left to the discretion of the teacher. Mandy and, in some ways, Allan currently take up the positions of pity, tolerance, and empathy for difference. The teachers voice concerns about student readiness and relevance, parental and community backlash and disapproval, the practicalities of inclusive teaching and learning strategies, skills and lack of confidence to carry out classroom discussion and deal with potential homophobia from the students, as reasons why sexuality diversity is only included at the discretion of individual teachers.

Conclusion

In conclusion whilst the data have shown that similarities exist in these challenges there are also clear and distinct differences in the teacher's ability to affirm and include gender and sexual diversity, differences that will emerge more clearly as teachers engage in professional development designed to provide understandings, knowledge and skill to assist them to include and affirm sexuality diversity, but that's another paper. Thank you.

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