

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF HOMOPHOBIA AND  
HETEROSEXISM IN THE NEWFOUNDLAND  
EDUCATION SYSTEM

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF HOMOPHOBIA AND  
HETEROSEXISM IN THE NEWFOUNDLAND EDUCATION SYSTEM

by

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### Abstract

The purpose of this research was to investigate gay and lesbian students' and teachers' experiences of homophobia and heterosexism in the classrooms and curricula of St. John's and Mount Pearl, Newfoundland. Interviews were conducted with lesbian and gay teachers and students. I investigated three aspects of lesbian and gay issues in the Newfoundland high school education system: i) experiences of lesbian and gay students and teachers; ii) the substance of what gay and lesbian students and teachers have learned and/or taught about homosexuality in courses; and iii) possible curriculum changes which would help decrease homophobia and/or heterosexism in our school system. Five themes emerged: i) the process of coming out; ii) experiences of homophobia and heterosexism; iii) knowledge and attitudes of gay and lesbian students regarding their sexual orientation; iv) information about gay and lesbian issues learned and/or taught in school; and v) ways in which lesbian and gay issues could be integrated into the curriculum.

Through the investigation of the experiences gay and lesbian students and teachers *have encountered in the education system*, the themes of coming out and experiences of homophobia and heterosexism emerged. I found that while gay and lesbian students are out to many at school, teachers are out to only a select few colleagues. Examples of overt physical or verbal harassment were experienced by only two participants. Only one teacher felt that homophobia was a problem at her school, while all the students relayed stories of anti-gay jokes and comments, which are often ignored by their teachers.

I also investigated what students have learned and teachers have taught regarding

knowledge of and attitudes towards lesbian and gay issues, and classes where homosexuality has been discussed. The students in this study were generally very knowledgeable about homosexuality, and accepting of their sexual orientation. However, very little positive information has been learned in school. Similarly, the teachers I interviewed have initiated little discussion about gay and lesbian issues. However, the topic arises out of students' interest during class discussions or through their writing.

A major theme which emerged from the data was the need of both teachers and students to address gay and lesbian issues in the curriculum. They both suggested ways in which the lives of gays and lesbians could be integrated into the curricula of literature, social studies, science, art, mathematics, family studies, and religious education.

Teachers and students also suggested several other desired changes to the education system. Some of these include gay and lesbian support groups in their schools, anti-homophobia workshops for students, teachers and guidance counsellors, pamphlets, posters, and library resources to increase lesbian and gay visibility, a mandatory university course for guidance counsellors on gay and lesbian youth, and job protection for gay and lesbian teachers.

Teachers are interested in protection from being fired, a school board policy on anti-gay violence, and greater visibility of lesbians and gays through the Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association.

I believe a handbook for the teachers of this province on gay and lesbian issues would help alleviate some of the homophobia and heterosexism in our education system.

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## Chapter I

### Introduction

In 1992 I decided to enrol in the Master of Women's Studies Program for the sole purpose of becoming a better feminist. At that time I felt in order to have the privilege of labelling myself 'lesbian', it was imperative to first understand feminism, and how lesbianism and feminism complement each other. I still believe this is true.

No other study has impacted so strongly on who I am, and the person I have become. I feel a personal responsibility to change the education system in Newfoundland. When asked to speak as a 'professional' in the field of gay and lesbian youth, I feel I have no choice; people are depending on me. I have socially constructed myself to become a spokesperson for improving the lives of lesbian and gay students and educators in Newfoundland.

My personal and professional growth has not come without cost. I am viewed by other teachers as the resident lesbian feminist. Because students and teachers assume I am an expert in every aspect of women's issues, I have to live up to a reputation I never dreamed would be so stringent. Any politically incorrect joke, comment, or attitude displayed by me is reprimanded. I am expected to be an environmentalist, socialist, and pro-abortionist; groups whose political ideologies I know little about. One of the teachers I interviewed stated that she did not want to be known as the lesbian teacher; she was a teacher first. It has been a long time since I have felt that way. I am labelled by colleagues as the lesbian teacher, with all the stereotypes that group has about lesbians.

I have coddled the colleagues through sensitivity training; providing them with



information on gay and lesbian issues, biting my tongue over homophobic remarks, and begging for permission to bring a student to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Questioning Youth Group. I have come out to students who questioned their sexual orientation, recognizing how just one out lesbian teacher can make a difference to gay and lesbian students. Colleagues constantly warn me that outing myself could be detrimental to my job.

I share much of my political work with a student who came out to me over a year ago. One day I explained to him that the reason I was sharing this information was so that when I became too old and burned out to lobby any longer, he would have an understanding of the work previously performed in our province. He told me that he wouldn't have to be political; all the work will have been finished. While I do not share his naivete, such optimism makes this thesis well worth the effort.

From my struggle as a lesbian feminist teacher arose an interest in researching how other gays and lesbians in the education system are experiencing their struggles. It is for this reason I decided to devote my thesis to fulfil the requirement for my Master of Women's Studies to "The Social Construction of Homophobia and Heterosexism in the Newfoundland Education System." I investigated the educational experiences of gay and lesbian teachers and students, what (if anything) is being taught about homosexuality in classes, and curriculum changes which would make the education system more gay and lesbian positive.

In my thesis I identify my research questions and the significance of my research.

A section is devoted to the history of sexuality, in order to reveal how the regulation of sexual behavior has served to perpetuate homophobia and the notion of compulsory heterosexuality. I also report on several theoretical perspectives: the essentialist, social constructionist, and postmodern theories of sexuality, and discuss their contributions to the study of sexuality. These theories are also important in the understanding of oppression of gays and lesbians, and help to explain why homosexuality has been left out of the curriculum. *I discuss how heterosexism permeates the Newfoundland education system, and how it impacts on our youth. I investigate the recent initiatives in other parts of Canada, for example school boards that are struggling to address gay and lesbian issues in their curricula. My thesis draws upon social constructionist theories in Sociology, as well as perspectives from Lesbian and Gay Studies, and from Education on homophobia and heterosexism. In my thesis I also define terms that are commonly taken for granted, such as lesbian, homosexual, gender, homophobia, and heterosexism.*

*I discuss my methodology in the second section of this thesis. I explain the rationale behind choosing interviews with both gay and lesbian teachers and students, and the reasons these people fear not only coming out<sup>1</sup>, but also being interviewed. I state how I located my informants. How I analyzed the data I collected is also presented in my methodology section. I also discuss some of the challenges which are unique to my study; ones that are both threatening and controversial in education today.*

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<sup>1</sup>A life-long process of disclosing to family, friends, and co-workers one's homosexual orientation.

The experiences of gay and lesbian students and teachers, what has been taught about homosexuality in courses, and recommended curriculum changes are presented in the chapter on findings.

A summary of main findings, theoretical implications, practical implications, and suggestions for further research are presented in the conclusion.

### **Significance of Study**

Outing myself to all of my teacher colleagues has helped reduce stereotyping and behaviour prejudicial to lesbians. No longer are gay jokes told in my presence (or hopefully in the staff room in my absence). Many teachers do not accept derogatory comments about homosexuality in their classrooms. Instead, they now talk to students about the possible presence of gay and lesbian students and staff. Most of the teachers recognize my partner and me as a couple; some even view us as a legitimate family unit, sharing concerns similar to those of our heterosexual counterparts.

Since becoming a Master of Women's Studies candidate, I realize the impact just one educator may have on the education system. Both gay and lesbian teachers and students might have been empowered by being interviewed about their experiences in the Newfoundland education system, and the thesis results may contribute to making changes in the education system. My thesis will therefore not only fulfil the requirements for my Master of Women's Studies, but will also hopefully serve to educate teachers and students in Newfoundland.

Through studying gay and lesbian issues, I have become interested in helping a much oppressed group of teens through the following volunteer work.

1. I help coordinate a gay and lesbian youth group, whose major goal is to provide this population with a place to go and meet other youths.
2. I represent the lesbian community with The Public Awareness Advisory Group of The Provincial Strategy Against Violence. The strategy has recently endorsed my proposal to conduct anti-homophobia workshops for high school students in St. John's and surrounding areas.
3. Since September, 1997, I have been a member of the Equity Issues in Education Committee with the Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association (NLTA). As a committee member, I have recently designed an anti-homophobia pamphlet and poster which was approved by the NLTA executive. These pamphlets and posters will be distributed to every junior high and high school in Newfoundland and Labrador. I also plan to obtain endorsement through the NLTA for workshops to teachers on homophobia in the education system.
4. I have conducted workshops on 'Myths Surrounding Lesbians and Gays', 'Developmental Issues Pertaining to Lesbian and Gay Youth', and 'Homophobia in the Newfoundland High Schools'.
5. I have met with members of the provincial government on several occasions to lobby for an amendment to the Human Rights Code which would prohibit discrimination against gays and lesbians in employment, housing, and goods and services. In December of 1997 this code was amended.
6. Through my interviews with gay and lesbian teachers, I hope to have made them more aware of our youths' needs, and the lack of information and guidance available to them.

All of these initiatives have arisen out of knowledge and confidence acquired through being a student of the Women's Studies Program.

My work continues to empower me as an educator, thereby, I believe, making me a better teacher. Through understanding how homophobia, heterosexism, and even sexual

orientation are historically regulated and socially constructed, I feel more equipped to deal with the power of patriarchy in our education system. I have already studied the Family Life curricula of many other provinces, and have detected their heterosexual bias. I also investigated other more gay-positive curricula that are available in the United States and England. I feel this thesis should make a valuable contribution, as it is unique in Newfoundland. No researcher to date has challenged this particular area of the high school curriculum.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this research was to investigate gay and lesbian students' and teachers' experiences of the classroom and curriculum. I therefore interviewed lesbian and gay youth and teachers regarding their experiences with peers and teachers, and investigated if (and how) homosexuality is addressed in their courses. My interviews focused on three main research questions:

- 1. What experiences have gay and lesbian students and teachers encountered in the education system?**
- 2. What have gay and lesbian students and teachers learned and/or taught about homosexuality in courses?**
- 3. In the views of gay and lesbian students and teachers, what curriculum changes would help decrease homophobia and/or heterosexism in our school system?**

## **Chapter II**

### **Literature Review**

#### **The History of Sexuality**

Popular speculation running through the lesbian community during the winter of 1997 was that Ellen DeGeneres's character on her television sitcom "Ellen", would come out as a lesbian,<sup>2</sup> and that the real-life Ellen was also a lesbian. Hopes of lesbian and gay icons are not unique to the small community of lesbians in St. John's. Lesbians and gays from five countries around the world celebrated Ellen's coming out by hosting parties registered with GLAD (Gays and Lesbians Against Defamation). Many lesbians and heterosexual<sup>3</sup> writers have debated whether Sappho, a Greek lyricist who lived on the island of Lesbos twenty-five hundred years ago, was a lesbian. The hundreds of poems and fragments which are almost exclusively about women, have been the source of controversy between Sappho scholars for centuries (Pellegrini, 1994). However, while the debate *may continue* for years within academia, lesbians have claimed this famous poet as one of their own. It is consoling for lesbians and gays to claim gay heroes, as positive

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<sup>2</sup>A woman whose romantic, emotional, and sexual attractions are primarily with women. I feel one must identify as a lesbian to be considered such.

<sup>3</sup>A person whose romantic, emotional, and sexual attractions are primarily with those of the opposite sex. I feel one must identify as heterosexual to be considered such.

images of famous homosexuals<sup>4</sup> can reflect our own self-image. Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Virginia Woolf, and Plato are all documented as experiencing homosexual relationships, while contributing enormously to society (Cowan, 1988).

While research on the history of homosexuality has continued for over a century, the motives for such inquiry have varied. Some historians have been interested in the connection between the subject's private and public life (Chauncey, Duberman & Vicinus, 1989). For example, Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) is not only examined for his poetry and play writing, but also for committing 'sodomy' against young boys, and consequently serving two years in a London prison (Miller, 1995). Gay historians have also been interested in documenting the oppression of homosexuals. The oral histories of journalist Eric Marcus (1992) investigate the struggles for gays and lesbians to obtain equal rights in the United States from 1945-1990. Most importantly, gays and lesbians seek both a tradition, as a history of homosexuality has been denied or ignored for too long, and answers as to why oppression continues.

The gay and lesbian communities have increasingly recognized that some of the most important issues facing, *agitating, and sometimes dividing them* today, personally and collectively, are best addressed historically: What is the nature of gay or lesbian "identity"? To what extent do lesbians and gay men constitute a "community" - and what are its origins? What is the relationship of pedophilia (or sado-masochism) to homosexual culture and politics? What social conditions and *political strategies have made the enormous progress of gay people in the last two decades possible* - and how secure is that progress? Can the history of the treatment of

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<sup>4</sup>A person whose primary sexual attraction is for people of the same sex. I feel one must identify him/herself as a homosexual to be considered such.

homosexuals by the government and medical profession shed light on the current controversy about how the gay movement should deal with those entities during the AIDS crisis?

(Chauncey, Duberman, & Vicinus, 1989, pg. 11-12)

A more recent area of gay history seeks to reconstruct homosexuality as a social history, in that categories of sexuality are seen as contingent upon a specific society at a particular time.

The particular interrelations and activities which exist at any moment in a specific society create sexual and other categories which, ultimately, determine the broad range of modes of behavior available to individuals who are born within that society. In turn, the social categories and interrelations are themselves altered over time by the activities and changing relationships of individuals. Sexual categories do not make manifest essences implicit within individuals, but are the expression of the active relationships of the members of entire groups and collectives.

(Padgug, 1989, pg. 58)

Claiming that categories of sexualities are a result of social forces can be unsettling to homosexuals, as some historians have begun to doubt the existence of 'gays' and 'lesbians' throughout history (Vance, 1994). While homosexual acts appear to have been a part of most societies, people claiming gay and lesbian identities not limited to specific sexual activities are a phenomenon of present-day western society. That is, the identities, roles, personalities, and communities of the modern-day homosexuals in North America cannot be paralleled with same-sex sexual behavior in other ideological contexts.

"Homosexual" and "heterosexual" *behavior* may be universal; homosexual and heterosexual *identity and consciousness* are modern realities. These identities are not inherent in the individual. In order to be gay, for example, more than individual inclinations (however we might conceive of those) or homosexual activity is required; entire ranges of social attitudes and the construction of particular cultures, subcultures, and social relations



are first necessary. To "commit" a homosexual act is one thing; to *be* a homosexual is something entirely different.

(Padgug, pg. 60)

Therefore, at other times and places, homosexual identities and subcultures were very much different than our own. In ancient Athens there is no evidence of distinctions between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Adult men often behaved sexually with both men (usually younger), and women (usually their wives). "The homosexual of the ancient world was Everyman, not a specific "type" " (Miller, 1995, pg. xxii).

Kinsman (1987) asserts that a history of sexuality is a history of social relations, in that our "sexual scripts" are contingent upon our mental constructs, language, symbolic systems, and images. In this way, the manner in which we view our sexual behavior is not individualistic, but rather a social process. An investigation into the history of sexual behavior uncovers not only the manner in which sexual categories came into being, but also why homosexuals have come to be oppressed and heterosexuality has become, as Rich (1980) claims, compulsory.

*Regulating sexual behavior* is not unique to our century, and not always logical in any moral sense. Modern day religious fundamentalists argue that homosexual conduct is immoral because in the Bible, Leviticus states, "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman, it is an abomination...If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them" (Helminiak, 1994, pg. 43). While this passage appears straightforward, it must be put in its proper historical context to be fully understood. At the time, Jewish people believed

that they, the Israelites, were God's chosen people. The Israelites, who had conquered the Canaanites, were not to share any practices of that group. One such practice was that whole families had sex with one another to bless the seasons. Same-sex acts were therefore prohibited, not because of ethical or moral reasons, but rather because they wanted to remain separate and distinct from the group they had conquered. The sexual act in itself was not the issue, but rather the fact that the Israelites wanted to distance themselves from the Canaanites. Modern day religious fundamentalists have continued to label this prohibition a sin, outside of its historical context.

Homosexual acts continued on through many centuries. The sexologists, a new nineteenth century group of western 'scientists' who studied human sexuality, defined same-sex love using the term *homosexuality*. The term was first used in 1869, by Karl Maria Kertbeny, a German-Hungarian. He was trying to abolish Prussia's laws regulating sexual relations between men (Miller, 1995).

It was not until the middle of the nineteenth-century that the category of "lesbian" was formed (Kitzinger, 1987). Women's romantic friendships, often called "crushes" or "smashes", were permitted, yet trivialized, in western societies in earlier centuries. During the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, middle- and upper-class girls in boarding schools and colleges in England and America often sent flowers, locks of hair, and love letters to each other. While same-sex relationships were probably common outside of women's colleges, jails, and nunneries, they may have been even more prevalent in these settings, since there were large numbers of females living completely independent of men.

Perhaps because educated women have left written accounts of these friendships, they appear to be more prevalent in all-women colleges. They held romantic all-women dances, became athletic, educated, and were often *financially independent*. After graduation, many women rejected their expected role of wife and mother to enter careers for which they had been trained in college. Then, as now, in order to succeed in a man's world, some chose or felt forced into wearing men's clothing and into pretending to be male (Faderman, 1991).

The negative stigmatization of same-sex relationships was popularized by sexologists at the end of the nineteenth century, who without any data 'scientifically' classified all romantic friendships among women as "lesbian", "perversions", and "disorders" (Faderman, 1991). As reported by Faderman, Havelock Ellis, an American sexologist, felt that women's colleges encouraged lesbianism:

They kiss each other fondly on every occasion. They embrace each other with mutual satisfaction. It is most natural, in the interchange of visits, for them to sleep together. *They learn the pleasure of direct contact, and in the course of their fondling they resort to cunnilinguistic practices...* After this the normal sex act fails to satisfy [them].

(Faderman, 1991, pg. 49)

Jackson (1987) argues that sexologists such as Ellis and Marie Stopes (either consciously or unconsciously) constructed essentialist heterosexuality as we know it. Ellis 'proved' that male dominated sexuality was 'natural'. Jackson (1984) states that Ellis, by asserting that sexual intercourse was based on animal instincts, and also that women *enjoyed being raped, constructed and maintained power relations* between men and

women.

Marie Stopes, who held advanced degrees from London and Munich, wrote a marriage manual Married Love in 1918, which was printed in twenty-eight editions and remained popular for three decades. Jackson (1987) argued that while Stopes did *consider females' sexual autonomy*, she failed to challenge male power in sexual relationships. Jackson also noted that Stopes also argued, without any data, that women deprived of regular intercourse with men were sex-starved, as their bodies lacked the necessary chemical substances provided by male secretions.

This practice [coitus interruptus], while it may have saved the woman the anguish of bearing unwanted children, is yet very harmful to her, and is to be deprecated. It tends to leave the woman in "mid-air" as it were; to leave her stimulated and unsatisfied, and therefore it has a very bad effect on her nerves and general health, particularly if it is done frequently. The woman, too, loses the advantage (and I am convinced that it is difficult to overstate the physiological advantage) of the partial absorption of the man's secretions, which must take place through the large tract of internal epithelium with which they come in contact. If, as physiology has already proved is the case, the internal absorption of secretions from the sex-organs plays so large a part in determining the health and character of remote parts of the body, it is extremely likely that the highly stimulating secretions which *accompany man's semen can and do penetrate and affect the woman's whole organism.*

(Stopes, 1918, pg. 95-96)

Support of heterosexuality as 'natural' denies the possible existence and robs of any other form of sexual behavior (i.e. lesbianism) of normalcy and legitimacy. Sexologists such as Ellis and Stopes have served to naturalize, and therefore depoliticize, heterosexuality, further supporting patriarchy.

Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1840-1920), a professor of psychiatry at the University

of Vienna, labelled homosexuality "antipathic sexual instinct". His degeneracy theory which asserted that medical, psychiatric, and social problems were transmitted from generation to generation, and were the root cause of homosexuality. In his case studies, he emphasized heterosexual gender stereotypes, stating that homosexuals possess the characteristics of the gender opposite to themselves (Miller, 1995). This conceptualization is still popular. Gender, like sexuality, is a product of social interaction.<sup>5</sup> While sex is assigned based on one's genitalia, sexuality and sexual identity, become linked to gender through social processes. Keller (1992, pg. 46) argues that feminist theory regards gender as a "cultural transformation of male and female infants into adult men and women." Kinsman (1987) supports Keller's view.

Through this social process is created a "natural" attitude towards sexuality and gender. This formation of sexuality implants the ideas of masculinity and femininity within our very social and sexual beings, making it very difficult to disentangle our various needs grouped together as sexuality from biology, reproduction, and gender.

(pg. 25)

Unlike Krafft-Ebing, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) did not believe degeneracy caused homosexuality. Freud contended that a combination of nature and nurture was responsible, and that an "arrested development" at an early stage prevented people from "normal" opposite-sex attractions. While Freud did not believe that homosexuality could be changed, some of his followers did. Treatments such as aversion therapy, shock

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<sup>5</sup>Bohan (1993) explains the socially constructed view of gender as "a construct that identifies particular transactions that are understood to be appropriate to one sex" (pg. 7).

treatment, and lobotomies emerged. "The era of stigmatization, of 'gay is sick', had arrived" (Miller, 1995, pg. 25).

### **Theoretical Perspectives on Sexuality**

#### **Essentialist Views of Sexuality**

There is a debate concerning whether sexual orientation can best be explained by 'essentialist' or 'social constructionist' theories of sexuality (Weeks, 1989). Essentialists argue that sexuality is biologically determined, fixed at birth, constant, and that it cannot change throughout a person's life. While this argument alludes to heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality<sup>6</sup>, essentialist research began by heterosexuals problematizing, and so inquiring, into the "cause" of homosexuality. An essentialist perspective implies that the causes of how we think, feel, behave, etc. can all be reduced to sex, and that if we are attracted to a certain gender (male or female), it is because of genetics. There is virtually no parallel interest in the "cause" of heterosexuality, a situation which in itself may be seen as a homophobic approach.

Many people, both homosexual and heterosexual, hope that research will lead to establishing homosexuality as a biological trait (Grady, 1992). Arguing homosexuality as biological removes any responsibility for choice, and implies that we are gays and lesbians simply because we can't help it (Schuklenk, U. & Ristow, M., 1996). There are

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<sup>6</sup>A sexual orientation whereby people are sexually attracted to both men and women. To be bisexual, I feel a person must identify as such.

advantages to viewing sexual orientation as biological. Perhaps fewer people would fear that we are trying to recruit children to become gay, and parents might become more accepting of their gay children, as they would no longer carry the burden of guilt that a dysfunctional family life caused their child's homosexuality. Some gay advocates believe that a genetic basis for homosexuality would persuade law-makers that discrimination, similar to discrimination against genetic factors such as race and gender, is unconstitutional (Henry, W. A. III, 1995). Essentialism seen in this way weakens the hands of coercive priests, parents, etc. who desire a change in a person's sexuality, those who try to rationalise the claim that gay people recruit children, and those who wish to use that rationale as a basis to fire gay teachers.

However, there are also disadvantages to thinking about homosexuality as having a biological basis. Identifying a "gay gene" might eventually make it possible for scientists to "straighten up" the genetic code of gay and lesbian adults, or test for potential gayness in fetuses (LeVay, 1995), and abort those fetuses found positive.

While there has been an abundance of scientific research arising from and supporting this essentialist theory, much media attention was focused on that of Simon LeVay, a neurobiologist at the Salk Institute in San Diego, when he reported that brains of gay men differed physically from those of their heterosexual counterparts. He asserted that neurons in the hypothalamus (which is believed to influence sexual behavior) of gay men were on average less than half the size of heterosexual men - actually the same size as in women's brains (LeVay, 1995). This "modern" notion of homosexuality can be equated

to the old idea that gay men are similar to women. LeVay also claims, however, that this does not prove that some men are born gay, for "gay genes" (if they exist) may become effective only after birth through physical influences such as sexual behavior with other men.

LeVay's research has many flaws. All the men in LeVay's study had died of AIDS, a disease that attacks brain cells (LeVay, 1995), which could account for the smaller hypothalamus. Even though the control sample of heterosexual men had also died of AIDS, and most of this group had larger neurons in the area of the hypothalamus which may regulate sexual behavior, LeVay had no prior dealings with these people (Rist, 1995), and therefore, one could question his criteria for determining homosexual or heterosexual orientation. How could he know what sexual activity these men had experienced, let alone how they self-identified? LeVay also studied the brains of several women, who he assumed to be heterosexual. His criteria for determining their sexual orientation was "on the basis of the preponderance of heterosexual women in the population" (LeVay, 1995, pg. 65), a weak basis indeed. Finally, LeVay's findings focused on the averages of the size of the hypothalamus neurons; the data shows the variation was very wide. These flaws certainly appear to weaken LeVay's conclusions.

The essentialist theory of sexuality has weaknesses and positive and negative consequences for how lesbian and gay men are treated. It implies that sexual orientation cannot change, and that people have no choice, and puts them into a few pre-determined sexual categories. Essentialist theories cannot explain why or how some feminists, or



other women and men, change their sexual orientation to suit their political ideologies or for other reasons. Nor does this theory explain bisexuality - is it possible for one person to have both heterosexual and homosexual genes? Essentialism ignores the research of Alfred Kinsey, who found that most of his subjects were bisexual; i.e. they had experienced and/or fantasized about sexual activity with both sexes. Kinsey explained this by postulating that heterosexuality and homosexuality are not separate categories, but that sexuality is a continuum, with homosexuality and heterosexuality at opposite ends of the spectrum (Schippers, 1989). Kinsey argued that most people's sexual preferences were not either hetero- or homosexual, but rather both, differing by degree between individuals, at different times and in different social situations. Thus, essentialist theories seem too simple to explain such a complex, human, social interaction.

### **The Social Construction of Sexuality**

Social constructionism is a theory of how we come to describe and explain the world the way we do (Gergen, 1985). Constructivists argue that people categorize the world in a particular way because "they have participated in social practices, institutions, and other forms of symbolic action (e.g. language) that presuppose or in some way make salient those categorizations" (Shweder & Miller, 1985, p. 4). Categories are transmitted through the social process of symbolic interaction; they are not individually invented. Our characteristics such as gender and sexual orientation, and emotions such as love and anger are not developed independently by individuals, but as "simply a construct that identifies

particular transactions that are understood as appropriate" (Bohan, 1993, p. 7). Social constructionist theory supports the ideology that the personal is political. We define ourselves through interactions with society in both our own actions and how we receive society's covert messages regarding how we should behave. In this way social and political structures make, or construct, the people we are - the way we think, feel, and behave. Social construction theory importantly critiques science.

Most basic of all, social constructionism represents that taken-for-granted category of 'science' itself as socially constituted and historically determined, arguing that our notions about what it is to 'do' science, what 'counts' as facts, and what constitutes 'good' scientific practice are the products of the particular place, time and culture in which they are embedded. Not only the familiar categories which make up that *content* of science, but the very nature of science itself is thrown into question by the social constructionist movement (author's italics).

(Kitzinger, 1987, pg. 188)

Feminist researchers argue that sexuality is socially constructed (Jackson, 1987 & Kitzinger, 1987). We contend that sexual orientation is not biological, but rather the product of social interaction. Herek (1984) maintains that in western society we categorize people as women and men who are heterosexual or homosexual. This society constructs people's sexuality into neat compartments, with different expectations and stereotypes for each: gay men, heterosexual men, lesbians, heterosexual women, bisexual men, and bisexual women.

Adrienne Rich, (1980) in her essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" maintains that heterosexuality is socially constructed. She questions why lesbian existence has been denied in ideas about art, feminist scholarship, education,

friendships, lovers, and community. She argues that every culture throughout history has had some women reject heterosexual relationships, and live a woman-connected existence. Rich points out that heterosexuality is made compulsory by certain ideas such as hegemonic pornography, and actions such as clitoridectomies, and nullifying lesbianism. Women thus become convinced that heterosexuality is inescapable and necessary, even though in many cases unsatisfying and depressing. In Rich's view, even Women's Studies courses are guilty of making only token references to lesbianism. Rich challenges feminist research and theory as contributing to compulsory heterosexuality:

"...when we look hard and clearly at the extent and elaboration of measures designed to keep women within a male purview, it becomes an inescapable question whether the issue feminists have to address is not simple "gender inequality" nor the domination of culture by males nor mere "taboos against homosexuality", but the enforcement of heterosexuality for women as a means of assuring the male right of physical, economic, and emotional access. One of the many means of enforcement is, of course, the rendering invisible of the lesbian possibility, an engulfed continent which rises fragmentedly into view from time to time only to become submerged again. Feminist research and theory that contribute to lesbian invisibility or marginality are actually working against the liberation and empowerment of women as a group".

(Rich, 1980, pg. 647-648)

Rich further extends the notion of lesbian identity. She introduces the concept of a lesbian continuum, whereby women are bonded to women at different levels, independent of genital sexual arousal. Like Rich, Thompson (1993) agrees that lesbians are not a different category of women, but part of a female continuum. They both feel the dividing of lesbian from heterosexual women causes us to lose sight of the major goal of many women - to end male supremacy.

Like essentialism, social constructionism (white gaining popularity among feminists), does not answer all the questions concerning our sexualities. Constructionist theories do not account for the many homosexuals who felt different from their heterosexual siblings and peers as very young children. Not every lesbian was exposed to negative heterosexual role models, which has been one explanation of the "cause" of homosexuality. Similarly, why would so many "victims" of heterosexual violence or oppression not change their sexuality? *Most do not change their sexuality simply on command.*

Social constructionist theories of homosexuality do seem problematic when dealing with *homophobia* (Greenberg, 1988), as many heterosexuals are more comfortable with the notion that gays and lesbians were born homosexual, and will then excuse them for it. When religious leaders, counselors, or parents demand changing orientation, many homosexuals have argued that they cannot. Similarly, essentialist theories are safer for gay and lesbian teachers when parents demand such teachers should be fired, out of the fear that they will influence children's sexual orientation away from heterosexuality. While social constructionism does not necessarily imply an ability to change, essentialism certainly parallels a fixed orientation.

Social constructionist theories are not as clearly outlined as essentialist theories of sexuality. Researching hormones and genes, which is an essentialist approach, has more prestige than qualitative research, which is often based in social constructionism. Some homosexuals believe that if we cannot change our behavior, we should not be oppressed.

If sexuality is constructed by belief systems, and not genetic, why would people become homosexual, when prejudice against it clearly causes misery to so many individuals? Thirty percent of teen suicides may have to do with sexual identity issues (Hersch, 1991). Acts of homophobia<sup>7</sup> by our co-workers and families of orientation are indeed painful. Furthermore, therapists have been remarkably unsuccessful in "curing" gay people of their "illness", even when they said they wanted to change (Koertge, 1990). Political lesbians argue they made a choice to change their sexual orientation as a statement against patriarchy. However, there are a number of heterosexual feminists who connect with women, and still feel they are physically attracted only to men. If a woman in a lesbian community starts a sexual relationship with a man, her friends expect her to "be back". Perhaps because we don't believe we can change, we don't.

Perhaps the biggest threat to homosexuals is that social constructionist theories will only be applied to homosexuality. Once again, heterosexuality will be left unchallenged by unquestioning hegemonic heterosexuals "researching" the causes of homosexuality. If homosexuality is accepted as being socially constructed, some fear lesbian and gay identity will be trivialized, as that too is constructed (Vance, 1989).

So, who benefits from any theory of sexuality? Bisexuals are still frowned upon and even rejected by some members of both the heterosexual and homosexual communities. Lesbians are labelled as such to keep us separate - different from

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<sup>7</sup>An irrational fear, hatred, or repulsion toward homosexuals. Homophobic behavior includes name-calling, verbal harassment, and physical assault.

mainstream society. Butler (1993) claims that identity categories are instruments of regulatory regimes. Thus, a set of stereotypes about both lesbian and straight women tend to compartmentalize us. As lesbians we view ourselves as independent from men and connecting emotionally and sexually with only women. Some heterosexuals could never imagine having sex with a woman, or losing all the privileges associated with marriage. Thus, paradoxically, once we identify ourselves as lesbians, we can argue we are oppressed, and celebrate our differences, but in so doing, we conveniently construct categories which separate us from heterosexual women.

### **Postmodernism**

While all feminist theories attempt to "...describe women's oppression, to explain its causes and consequences, and to prescribe strategies for women's liberation", (Tong, 1989, pg. 1) no theory has included the lesbian experience so fundamentally as postmodern feminism. Other feminist theories such as liberalism, Marxism, and socialism have been criticized for not naming and for not being relevant to minorities such as lesbians, women of colour, and disabled women, and not attempting to take the experiences of these minorities into account (Elliot & Mandell, 1995). Postmodernism is, for me, a 'breath of fresh air', in that queer theory is finally being given serious *consideration*.

Similar to social constructionist theory, postmodernism criticizes scientific objectivity. Postmodern theorists assert that objective, universal, scientific truth is

impossible. Categories are only meaningful in their historical and cultural contexts.

Postmodernists have focused on the growth of science and its widening influence over many spheres of life throughout modernity. They have claimed that in the name of "science", authority has become exercised in a variety of ways: in the disciplines, the media, popular advice manuals, and so on. By pointing to the element of power in such modern practices, postmodernists have extended the field where power has traditionally been viewed as operating, for example, from the state and the economy to such domains as sexuality and mental health.

(Nicholson, 1990, pg. 4)

So finally, the power of heterosexual identity is recognized by this group of theorists.

Categories such as 'gay' and 'lesbian' are not only viewed in their historical context, but as we are already familiar regarding economics and the state, in their relations to power.

Postmodern theorists such as Michel Foucault and Carol Vance inquire: Who produces these categories? Why were these categories produced? Who benefits from these categories? How are they changed over historical time?

Foucault contended that people were not "free", but rather at the mercy of historical forces. Rejecting a liberal, humanistic view of reality, he insisted that our opinions, habits, and institutions are all products of history. Vance, a social constructionist, supports Foucault's assertion that sexuality is subject to historical forces.

[Constructionist] frameworks have challenged the 'natural' status of many domains, presenting the possibility of a truly *social* inquiry as well as suggesting that human actions have been and *continue to be subject to* historical forces and, thus, to change. Gender and sexuality have been the very last domains to have their natural, biological status called into question.

(Vance, 1984, pg. 14)

Foucault claims that the nineteenth century's categorizing of sexuality created

homosexuality. During the late eighteenth century, he asserts that homosexual behavior was nothing more than forbidden acts. Once homosexuality was studied by sexologists, it became a medical category, and thus the homosexual was created, a person with a unique identity.

Nothing that went into [the homosexual's] total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away...The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.

(Foucault, 1978, pg. 43)

While Vance and Foucault are both social constructionists and postmodernists, they differ in some of their opinions. Foucault argues there was no gay identity before the nineteenth century.

[Foucault] argued that the nineteenth century - with its relentless categorization of sexual "perversions" - had, instead of repressing sexuality, actually done the opposite. In the case of homosexuality, the early sexologists had transformed the sin of sodomy into the "personage", the "species" of the modern homosexual.

(Miller, 1995, pg. 471)

Vance, on the other hand, is not sure whether or not a gay identity existed before sexologists categorized homosexuality.

Social construction theory does not predict a particular answer: whether something we call 'gay identity' existed in the 17th or 19th century...or whether 19th-century female romantic friendship or crossing-women are properly called 'lesbian', is a matter for empirical examination. Contemporary gay identity might exist in other times and cultures or it might not...Construction theory is against premature closure, and its price is tolerating ambiguity.

(Vance, 1984, pg. 15)



Kinsman (1987) claims that homosexuality, lesbianism, and heterosexuality have been socially constructed, and are recent creations. He discounts the claim of essentialism; *that there is an "intrinsic, natural gay, lesbian, heterosexual, or other form of sexuality"* (pg. 15), and discusses how lesbians and gays have been constructed as "deviants" in a heterosexual world.

Kinsman uses the "hegemony theory" to explain the normalization and naturalization of dominant heterosexual culture. He argues that this hegemony is constructed and maintained by all those agents and agencies which construct homosexuality as deviant. To me, Kinsman claims to hold a postmodern theory of sexuality in that he feels homosexuality has been socially constructed by regulatory *institutions such as the church and education system in order to keep us oppressed.*

The entry of heterosexual hegemony into public common-sense attitudes involves many variants of heterosexist discourse, each of which merits its own analysis...These include homosexuality as a sin (in religious discourse); as unnatural (in both religious and secular discourse); as illness (in medicine and psychiatry and in a new sense with the current AIDS crisis); as a congenital disorder or inversion (in sex psychology or sexology); as deviance (in some sociological theory); homosexuals as child molesters, seducers, and corruptors (in certain sexological studies and the media); as a symptom of social degeneration (in Social Darwinist and eugenic discourse); homosexuals as communists, "pinkos", and a national security risk because of the potential for blackmail (rooted in McCarthyism, military organization, the Cold War and 1950s spy scandals); as tolerated only when practised between consenting adults in "private" (the Wolfenden strategy of privatization); and as a criminal offense or a social menace (in police campaigns, "moral panics" and the media.

(Kinsman, pg. 33)

Mary McIntosh (reprinted in 1981) argued in her 1968 article "The Homosexual

Role", that to date homosexuality has been researched as a condition which characterizes a group of people. This conceptualization of homosexuality lends support to two major perspectives of essentialism; first that a person is either homosexual or not, and second that there are identifiable cause(s) of the condition.

Instead, McIntosh (1981) posits that labelling some people as homosexuals operates as a form of social control. Being labelled homosexual demands permissible behavior from heterosexuals; that is sexual behavior between men and women only. Homosexuality also serves to create and segregate deviants (homosexuals) from non-deviants (heterosexuals). When a group is labelled as deviant, the roles, behaviors, and feelings of this group become fixed. Thus, we are left with the dichotomy of heterosexual and homosexual.

### **The Literature on Homophobia and Heterosexism**

#### **Homophobia**

Most research on homophobia to date has explored homophobia through a liberal humanistic approach - a 'blame the individual' method (Kitzinger, 1987). People are viewed as responsible and accountable for their own behaviors and attitudes. Just as discrimination is often seen as applying to an individual victim, rather than to members of a particular group, so is homophobia attributed to the individual. Here I review the literature since the early 1970s, which probes into the possible personality traits of homophobic individuals.

While this literature may shed light upon possible causes of homophobia on an individual level, a theoretical framework at the societal level is lacking. Liberalism serves to remove homophobia from the political domain. Responsibility is shifted from society when individuals, instead of society, are viewed as pathological, but for homophobia to be so widespread and so acceptable, there are obviously social functions which homophobia serves. Rubin (1993, p. 6) points out that young males "...come into gay neighbourhoods armed with baseball bats and looking for trouble, knowing that the adults in their lives either secretly approve or will look the other way." Sarachild (1975) argues that liberalism functions to stop the oppressed from rebelling against major institutions such as the family, church, and education system. It is far more difficult to rebel against these institutions for homophobia than to blame people for individual acts of homophobia.

Liberal leadership emerges whenever an oppressed group begins to move against the oppressor. It works to preserve the oppressor's power by avoiding and preventing exposure and confrontation. The oppressed is always resisting the oppressor in some way, but when rebellion begins to be public knowledge and the movement becomes a powerful force, liberalism becomes necessary for the oppressor to stop the radical upsurge.  
(p. 57)

One cause of individual homophobia is ignorance. Millham, San Miguel, & Kellogg, (1976) found that homophobes are less likely than non-homophobes to know or have knowingly had personal contact with lesbians or gay men in the past. Thus, their attitudes are completely unfounded. Their beliefs are formed from ignorance. Comparable to racists, classists, and ageists, they hate and fear the unknown. Sometimes, when these people realize a family member or close friend is lesbian or gay, their fear is

abated. However, stereotypes are not. Misconceptions are bound to occur when a person assumes all lesbians and gay men are acceptable because that person happens to know one homosexual. More often, however, the homophobe feels that this lesbian or gay man is not a typical 'dyke' or 'queer', and stereotypes are still imposed on other homosexuals (Millham, San Miguel, & Kellogg). People with negative attitudes are less likely to report having engaged in homosexual behavior, or to identify themselves as lesbian or gay (Mosher & O'Grady, 1979). Being homophobic lessens one's chances of being lesbian or gay, however, internalized homophobia, or hatred directed toward oneself because of one's homosexuality, is far too common. This form of homophobia causes, and may be an effect of, low self-esteem, depression, and self-abusive behaviors such as alcoholism and suicide.

Homophobia, whether conceptualized as an individual or a group phenomenon, is commonly associated with certain values. Homophobic individuals are more likely to value strict, traditional sex roles (Millham & Weinberger, 1977). Homophobic males are usually comfortable only in very stereotypically masculine roles such as being the head of the household, being physically and emotionally strong, and interested in activities such as hockey or football. Anything which deviates is considered unmanly. Likewise in Millham's and Weinberger's view (1977), homophobic females are usually comfortable only in very stereotypically feminine roles such as mother and home maker, and interested in activities such as shopping and baking. Anything which deviates from this role is considered unfeminine. According to Henley & Pincus (1978), homophobic people are

more likely to be religious, attend church regularly, and follow strict religious doctrine. Those who feel they are the most religious, and live the most moral lives, are often those who are the most prejudiced against homosexuality.

Homophobes are more likely to live in places where negative attitudes toward homosexuals are accepted as the norm (Whitehead & Metzger, 1981). Small towns are perhaps one of the worst places to grow up if you are homosexual. Because there is little exposure to anything or anyone that is not mainstream, people are often treated like freaks if they deviate from the majority of the community. Many lesbians and gay males have left small communities in Newfoundland to move to St. John's, where the homosexual communities are somewhat larger (Stone, 1990). Likewise, many homosexuals from St. John's have moved to larger centres such as Toronto or Vancouver to ward off homophobia by maintaining anonymity. Homophobes are more likely to think their friends also have negative attitudes about homosexuality, especially if they are male (Larsen, Reed, & Hoffman, 1980). Thus, individuals often carry the prejudices of their friends, and appear to be afraid of speaking out against their friends' beliefs.

Intolerance of homosexuality is also often found in individuals who manifest high levels of authoritarianism (Karr, 1978). Homophobes often have a 'father knows best' attitude, show little regard for the rights of women and children, and use rigid punishment with misbehaving children.

Rather than describing individual homophobes, Blumenfeld (1992) explores the ideology of homophobia as separated into four distinct, yet interrelated categories:

personal, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural homophobia. Personal homophobia is defined as individuals believing that gays and lesbians are inferior, disgusting, genetically defective, or psychologically disturbed in relation to heterosexuals.

Interpersonal homophobia results when personal homophobia is manifested into action. Examples would include name-calling, jokes, or insults which are common occurrences in our schools and places of work. Herek (1989) reported that in the United States, ninety-two percent of lesbians and gay men have been the targets of anti-gay verbal abuse or threats, and twenty-four percent have been physically attacked. All too often when gays or lesbians disclose their sexual orientation, family members, friends, or co-workers will abandon them. Interpersonal homophobia is also manifested in the refusal to hire, denial of insurance and employee benefits, and refusal of goods and services.

Institutional homophobia is defined by Blumenfeld (1992) as the ways that government, businesses, and educational and religious institutions systematically discriminate against gays and lesbians in laws, policies, and practices. In Newfoundland, despite efforts by gay and lesbian groups lobbying to change the Human Rights Code to include sexual orientation as a prohibited grounds of discrimination, government continued for years to postpone the amendment (Lacey, Hodder, & Shortall, 1996). Even if the government does amend the code, teachers will be exempt, as denominational school boards have the right to fire teachers on religious grounds; a right protected by

Newfoundland's Terms of Union with Canada (Royal Commission on Education, 1992).<sup>8</sup>

Cultural homophobia includes a conspiracy to silence, denial of culture, denial of popular strength, fear of overvisibility, creation of defined places, denial of self-labelling, and negative symbolism, and is described by Blumenfeld (1992) as codes of behavior that are expected by society. Unlike institutional homophobia, these codes of behavior are neither law nor policy. They do, however, manifest and legitimize oppression of gays and lesbians.

Gay and lesbian students are often denied information about support groups in their communities, cannot find books in their libraries, and learn nothing of gay and lesbian issues in an ever-present heterosexist curriculum. These are forms of cultural homophobia and are experienced as a denial to silence the presence of other gays and lesbians.

The silence is also evident among members of society who refuse to believe that there are a significant number of gays and lesbians, even though many studies suggest that up to ten percent of the population are sexual minorities (Project 10 Handbook, 1993). Further, when people do not disclose their sexual orientation in fear of losing their jobs, families, or friends, accurate percentages, and consequently strength of a minority, is repressed.

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<sup>8</sup>On Tuesday, December 9, 1997, the House of Assembly passed Bill 21, an Act to amend the Human Rights Code in Newfoundland which includes sexual orientation as a prohibited grounds of discrimination. On Thursday, December 11, 1997, Brian Tobin, the Premier of Newfoundland stated that "Teachers will no longer have to worry about losing their jobs because of sexual preference...once Term 17 [an amendment to Newfoundland's Terms of Union with Canada] is passed in Ottawa" (The Evening Telegram, Thursday, December 11, 1997).

Gays and lesbians are continuously denied visibility equal to their heterosexual counterparts. While heterosexuals are 'allowed' to kiss and hold hands in public, gays and lesbians are constantly reminded not to be blatant, and not to flaunt their homosexuality. Even a picture of a same-sex spouse displayed on our desk is considered by some to be too liberal and 'in one's face.'

When gays and lesbians are lucky enough to be provided space for dances, meetings, support groups, and other community events, the places are often in ghettos; a reminder to the public that gay and lesbian life is filled with poverty, isolation and marginalization.

While homosexuals have chosen labels such as gay and lesbian, derogatory labels such as 'dyke', 'faggot', and 'butch' were chosen by outsiders to oppress sexual minorities. In the last decade, gays and lesbians have taken back and embraced these labels as their own as tools of empowerment. Usually, however, new labels are discovered by outsiders as tools of degradation.

Myths, or negative symbols, about gays and lesbians are numerous. Gays are portrayed as child molesters and sexually promiscuous. Lesbians are stereotyped as man-hating truck drivers. Both gays and lesbians are perceived as unable to maintain relationships equal to that of their heterosexual counterparts.

Blumenfeld supports a social constructionist view of homophobia. While personal and interpersonal homophobia are beliefs and acts on an individual basis, they are reinforced, and perpetuated by, institutional and cultural homophobia.



## Heterosexism

Perhaps one of the biggest causes of homophobia is the ideology of heterosexism<sup>9</sup> that constructs lifestyles as the norm, completely separate from and superior to homosexuality and bisexuality (Sparkes, 1994). Thus, non-heterosexual behavior, relationships, identity, and community are denied, ignored, or hidden (Herek, 1990). Homophobic acts and behavior are blatant and limited, however, heterosexism is more covert and permeates throughout all of societies' institutions: the family, church, government, and the education system (Project 10 Handbook, 1993). While homophobia may be viewed as more hateful and dangerous (i.e. gay bashing), heterosexism is more accepted in such acts as refusing same-sex benefits, denying gays and lesbians adoption rights, and excluding gay and lesbian content from high school curriculums. In the concept of heterosexism it is implicit that superior sexual orientation entitles one to privileges that are denied to others. Heterosexual marriage, parenting, spousal health care benefits, and housing are differentially valued in comparison with their equivalents in homosexual relationships (Spaulding, 1993). Jung and Smith (1993) describe heterosexism as a *reasoned* system of bias. Unlike homophobia, heterosexism is not based on fear or hatred. Instead it is a taken-for-granted belief rooted in what people believe about "normal" sexuality.

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<sup>9</sup>A belief that heterosexuality is better and more valid than homosexuality. Through this belief system gays, lesbians, and bisexuals are discriminated against, ignored, and pitied. Heterosexist values fuel homophobia (Herek, 1992).

It is not necessary for homophobia to be expressed for heterosexism as a cultural structure to be active in a particular moment. It operates through silences and absences as well as through verbal and physical abuse or through overt discrimination. Indeed, one form of heterosexism discriminates by failing to recognize differences. It posits a totally and unambiguously heterosexual world in much the same way as certain forms of racism posit the universality of whiteness. *In this way, the dominant form is made to appear 'normal' and 'natural' and the subordinate perverse, remarkable or dangerous.* Recognition of this general structure throws a flood of light on everyday experiences. First, the sheer work of establishing a gay or lesbian identity in forms that others will recognize is testimony to the pervasiveness of heterosexism. This labour of coming out *is often matched by the strength of denial on the part of recipients of significant messages.* Homosexuality seems so impossible that it is immediately ignored or repressed.

(Epstein & Johnson, 1994, pg. 198-199)

As a pattern of discrimination, heterosexism pervades most dimensions of this culture, while homophobic acts are less acceptable and more overt. Herek (1992) calls the promotion of only heterosexual values *cultural heterosexism*. He feels it is important to discover how heterosexism is transmitted through cultural institutions such as religion, the law, psychiatry and psychology, and the mass media.

This 'system' shapes our legal, economic, political, social, interpersonal, familial, historical, educational, and ecclesial institutions. *Heterocentrism* lies at the heart of this system of prejudice. Heterocentrism leads to the conviction that heterosexuality is *the* normative form of human sexuality. It is the measure by which all other sexual orientations are judged. All sexual authority, value, and power are centred in heterosexuality.

(Jung & Smith, 1993, pg. 14)

Therefore, because of heterosexism, our legal institutions deny adoption to same sex couples, our historical institutions devalue gay and lesbian histories, our ecclesial institutions forbid marriage between same-sex couples, and our educational institutions

promote only heterosexual values. Unless personally challenged, heterosexists don't appear to go around hating lesbians and gays. In fact, they don't appear to give us much thought, until we talk about our lives, or try to adopt children, or teach their children about our lives. Many people claim to tolerate homosexuals as long as we don't "flaunt" it, in acts such as hand-holding, kissing, or talking about our partners in public. Sexuality is supposed to be private. However, heterosexuality is publicly affirmed (Herek, 1990), and "flaunted". Weddings, baby showers, and hand-holding are all public customs for heterosexuals. Such behaviors by lesbians or gays would be perceived as radical and cause for harassment.

Advocates of heterosexism perceive the heterosexual experience as the only natural, viable expression of human sexuality. In this view, all forms of sexual behavior are supposed to lead up to vaginal intercourse. From a heterosexist point of view, nothing else is the real thing. Further, the only type of sexual behavior which is procreative is vaginal intercourse, proof for heterosexists that it is natural. However, Jung and Smith (1993) *argue that this perception is socially constructed.*

What is said about the natural, bodily link between lovemaking and baby making is a social construction. How people will conceive the reality of the link will vary cross-culturally and historically. Conceptions of this link that claim to be bias free frequently acquire a falsely privileged, objective stature by virtue of appearing to be culturally unmarked. Yet most often *such objective interpretations foster unchallenged particular interests, usually those of the status quo.*

(Jung & Smith, 1993, p. 41)

Gender, which Herek defines as "a set of shared beliefs, values, and customs

concerning 'masculinity' and 'femininity'" (Herek, 1992, pg. 96), is also socially constructed (Bohan, 1993) and forms an ideological context for, and is used as a tool to deny lesbian and gay identities. Bohan argues that what is considered masculine or feminine is not fundamentally connected with sex, but rather a perception of society, agreed upon and reproduced by participation in 'masculine' and 'feminine' behaviors. She contends that being labelled 'woman' implies many other traits such as sensitivity, weakness, and co-dependence. These traits serve patriarchy when women value these traits, a situation which serves to maintain their oppression. The masculine gender is equated with strength and emotional insensitivity. Children learn to value traditional masculinity and femininity at such an early age, gender roles seem natural, rather than constructs dictated by society. Because gays and lesbians are stereotyped as effeminate and hypermasculine respectively, they are perceived as abnormal. People rejecting gender conformity are labelled as homosexual, regardless of their sexual orientation.

While both lesbians and gays are attacked because of perceived gender nonconformity, the institution of heterosexism is often not the same for each group. When considering the experiences of homosexuals, lesbians are often either ignored or subsumed under to the gay experience (Spaulding, 1993). Often a lesbian is viewed as a woman who cannot get a man; i.e. cannot function as a heterosexual. Another popular perception is that lesbians are women who hate men, instead of women who love women (Spaulding, 1993). Further, lesbianism is perceived by some heterosexists as a phase of sexual development; the idea is that lesbians never achieve adulthood. Some think that a lesbian

must have experienced sexual abuse as a child.

Children learn gender roles and sexualities before they learn about homosexuality or (consciously) heterosexuality. Individual violence, or verbal attacks against lesbians and gays which Herek (1992) labels as *psychological heterosexism* is fostered through cultural heterosexism. While society does not condone violent acts, the heterosexist act of denying lesbians and gays equal privileges and respect fuels individual homophobes with the perception that since lesbians and gays are not worthy citizens, that homophobic actions are just.

### **Homophobia and Heterosexism Perpetrated by Adolescents**

A large percentage of perpetrators of anti-gay violence are youth. Comstock (1991) found that in the United States, nearly one-half of all perpetrators are twenty-one years old or younger, and ninety-four percent of the general population of perpetrators are male. Comstock (1991) also found that over half of the victims were approximately the same age as their perpetrators. Further, DeCecco (1984) found that the number of violent attacks against lesbian and gay youths has increased, especially since the onset of the AIDS epidemic. Together, this research implies that many of our youth are involved in homophobic violence, either as perpetrators or as victims. Lesbian and gay teens face danger and isolation.

### **Homophobia and Heterosexism Perpetrated by Family**

Lesbian and gay teens are a socially oppressed group, discriminated against by

institutions such as the family, and schools (Morrow, 1993). Parents of most lesbians and gays are heterosexual; teens therefore lack role models from that source for dating and intimate relationships. Hetrick and Martin (1987) report that parents often feel shame and guilt when they find out their child is lesbian or gay because homosexuality is often equated with poor parenting. In many cases, young gays and lesbians are rejected totally by being kicked out of their homes (Morrow, 1993). The media portrays gays as effeminate and lesbians as butch. So, at a time when teens are in great need of information about, and affirmation of their sexuality, most knowledge is pejorative (Greene, 1994). In these ways, families perpetuate both homophobia and heterosexism.

### **Gay and Lesbian Students' Experiences of Homophobia and Heterosexism in School**

Suicide attempts by youths continue to be under reported. Factors associated with lesbian and gay suicide include low self-esteem, social isolation, depression, negative family interactions, and negative social attitudes (Proctor & Groze, 1994). Avicoli (1986) found that twenty-five to thirty percent of gay, lesbian, or bisexual youth surveyed had attempted suicide by the mean age of 15.5 years. In the United States, approximately thirty percent of youth suicides are related to issues of sexual identity (Friend, 1993).

During the past two decades the topic of homosexuality has received more media, governmental, and medical attention than ever before. However, Newfoundland lesbian and gay youth continue to be silenced and ignored by our high schools. They are not even visible in the curriculum (Harris, 1990).

Lesbian and gay adolescents often feel school is a stressful experience. Some isolate themselves from extra-curricular activities, while others enter them and then quit (Morrow, 1993). School playgrounds and corridors are often arenas for homophobic harassment and violence. Within their peer group, lesbian and gay teens are exposed to verbal, and sometimes even physical abuse. Jokes about 'fags' and 'dykes' are not only common among youth, but ignored by teachers (O'Connor, 1994). Several young people have been the target of gay bashing in Newfoundland (Hodder, 1995). Many school libraries have either no books about lesbian or gay lifestyles, or the books which libraries do carry misrepresent homosexuality putting it in a negative context (Proctor & Croze, 1994).

The curriculum offers little information about gays and lesbians, which leaves gay and bisexual males ill-informed and at higher risk for HIV infection than most other youths (Cranston, 1991). For example, a grade nine *Adolescence: Relationships and Sexuality* (1987) text devotes only three paragraphs to the topic of homosexuality. One of the paragraphs provides a definition, while another assures adolescents that sexual interest in others of the same sex does not necessarily mean they will be a homosexual later in life. A grade nine text, *Skills for Healthy Relationships: Student Manual*, (1993) used in the Roman Catholic schools is a full program about sexuality, AIDS, and other STD's. Despite the fact that within the population of gay men in Newfoundland most of the recent HIV infections are those below twenty-five years old, (Hodder, 1995) this text makes little mention of gay relationships. AIDS education in the Newfoundland curriculum is almost

exclusively devoted to heterosexual teens. One of the texts for the Roman Catholic Family Living 2200 course, Valuing Values: A Guide for Parents of Teens, (Forliti, 1986) distinguishes between homosexual orientation and activity. While same-sex orientation is not portrayed as sinful, same-sex behavior is, because its purpose is not procreative.

Most importantly, lesbian and gay teachers and teens are silenced. While it is no longer politically correct to call someone a "nigger" or "chink"; pejorative terms related to homosexuals such as "fag", "dyke", and others are commonplace in schools. Most students do not risk revealing their sexual orientation to peers in fear of verbal or physical abuse. Homophobia is so prevalent in western societies today that probably all lesbians and gay men have experienced this form of negative treatment because of their sexual orientation - by being rendered invisible, through acts of violence, denial of civil or legal protection, or rejection by family and friends. Gay bashing is the most dangerous form of homophobic acts, and unfortunately is not limited to the United States. There have been numerous reports of violence against gay men in downtown St. John's in recent months (Barton, 1996). Verbal and physical violence against teens perceived as gay are common also in Newfoundland schools. One junior high student in Mount Pearl received a broken collar bone from his peers because it was considered "fruity" to play the classical guitar. Two students were recently suspended from schools in St. John's because of fighting after weeks of being taunted about being gay, a label assigned because of their "sissiness".<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>These anecdotes were relayed during my interviews with gay and lesbian teachers.



Even as young as grade three or four there is no worse a name to be labelled than gay, even though many children do not know what the term means (Rofes, 1995). At a time when heterosexual teens are worried about dating, future careers, and marriage, lesbian and gay teens face danger and isolation.

### **Counsellors and Teachers as Perpetrators of Homophobia and Heterosexism**

Most gay or straight teachers offer little, if any, support. It is indeed rare to find a teacher reprimanding a student for calling another queer, dyke, or fag with hostile intent, whereas most teachers do not permit racist or sexist slurs in the classroom. Some teachers allow and even laugh at anti-gay jokes told by students. Reinforcing homophobia (an unreasonable or irrational fear or hatred of homosexuals) by tolerating name-calling, hurts all youths. Homosexual youths are being taught that they are inferior to those of other sexual orientations, while heterosexual youths are learning nothing of acceptance of diversity for people who are different than themselves.

Sears (1991) conducted a study with lesbian and gay youths, school counsellors, and prospective teachers living in the southern United States. Most lesbian and gay students refused to speak to their guidance counsellor about their sexual orientation for several reasons. Many reported that counsellors were ill-informed, unconcerned, or uncomfortable about the issue. Further, students felt teachers were unwilling to show concern for lesbian and gay students.

Investigating prospective teachers' attitudes and feelings, Sears (1991) reported

eight out of ten harbored negative feelings toward lesbians and gay men. Those who had gay or lesbian friends had lower levels of homophobic attitudes. Also, those pursuing a high school teaching certificate were found to be less negative than those pursuing an elementary school teaching certificate. Even prospective teachers were not found to be knowledgeable about homosexuality. However, the more accurate knowledge they possessed, the less homophobic they appeared to be.

Most alarming, nearly two-thirds of the guidance counsellors in Sears (1991) study expressed negative attitudes and feelings about homosexuality and gays and lesbians. Those counsellors working in administrative and testing situations were more likely to harbor negative feelings than those directly counselling students. Further, the negative attitudes were centered more on moral issues (e.g. homosexuality is a sin).

Other studies support Sears' (1991) assertion that health care professionals such as guidance counsellors and social workers are often biased against gay and lesbian clients (Berger, 1983; Brown, 1996 and Chan, 1996). Messing, Schoenberg, & Stephens (1983) explain several ways homophobia is manifested in social workers. Many 'liberal' social workers feel that sexual orientation makes no difference, while other health care providers working with youth feel hostile against gays and lesbians and look to cure this population.

Murphy (1991) claims that while mental health professionals such as guidance counsellors and social workers come in contact with gay and lesbian clients, these professionals are often biased against homosexuals and unqualified to meet their needs. She argues that training programs should include gay and lesbian issues, the effects of

living in a homophobic society, and a list of resources for gay and lesbian clients. Most importantly, Murphy (1991, pg. 240) asserts that unless professionals "can actively affirm gay and lesbian lifestyles, they cannot ethically work with these clients."

Unfortunately, those who could perhaps most help the gay or lesbian student are also silenced. Griffin (1991), a teacher in the United States, argues that while there are many gay and lesbian teachers, they are an invisible group. Most educators stay in the closet in fear of being faced with prejudice and discrimination. Olson (1987) asserts that gay and lesbian teachers believe that their personal and professional lives must remain separate in order to protect their jobs or credibility with their colleagues. Some parents and teachers feel gay and lesbian teachers have an agenda, which includes recruiting youth or being child molesters (Khayatt, 1992). Therefore, gay and lesbian students are in homophobic and heterosexist institutions without positive role models.

Friend (1993) analyzed the construction of heterosexism and homophobia in schools, and its impact on both homosexual and heterosexual students. He views schools as reproducing and promoting social inequalities. This is evidenced in the assumption by educators that everyone is heterosexual. Friend cites a blatant example of heterosexism in the curriculum. To demonstrate the concept of positive and negative charges, a physics teacher uses an illustration of three couples. The first is a male and female with their arms around each other. The text underneath states "attraction". The other two couples are the same gender, one of two males, the other of two females. In both illustrations the couples are pulling away from each other. The text underneath states "repulsion".

Not only does Friend criticize the text, but also the education process which continuously reinforces students' heterosexual and homophobic values. He cites examples of systematic exclusion and systematic inclusion, which both serve to silence homosexuality. Systematic exclusion is described as the lack of positive role models, messages, and images about lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. Friend outlines explicit examples of systematic exclusion. When teachers allow homophobic comments by students, permission to be homophobic is communicated. Issues of sexual orientation are often dismissed or ignored. Lesbian and gay teachers feel too threatened to come out to their students, thus no positive role models are present. Examples of systematic inclusion (the visibility of only negative role models) are also provided. This type of heterosexism is described as the message that homosexuality is pathological, dangerous, or only involves sexual behavior. Discussions regarding homosexuality are often presented in negative terms such as in the context of AIDS/HIV. Students receive the message that homosexuality means dangerous sex, heterosexual means love, family, etc. When students do try to talk about same-sex feelings, these feelings are often dismissed as a phase.

More than two decades ago, Gagnon & Smith (1973) reported that of the main sex education sources - peer groups, schools, and the mass culture - the schools were the least effective. *They argued that sex education is often taught only as reproductive biology.* Sex education and family life programs have certainly changed in twenty years. No longer is the focus of these courses only on procreative sex. Dating relationships, masturbation,

AIDS, and feelings about sexual behavior are now common topics. Unfortunately, these programs in Canada offer little or no information about homosexuality as a normal sexual orientation (Morrow, 1993). Even curricula which address gay and lesbian lifestyles usually separate the topic from the regular sex education discussions.

Existing 'equal opportunities' approaches tend to assume that the needs of pupils beginning to identify as lesbian or gay can be addressed by simply 'adding on' lesbian and gay issues to the existing curriculum as if they are somehow discrete entities or issues wholly divorced from other areas of sexuality education...The problem lies in the fact that they work within a liberal framework that claims that gay and lesbian sexualities are 'different but equal'. While it would be nice if this were true, its assertion before the fact runs the risk of ignoring the very real ways in which lesbian and gay sexualities are subordinated, marginalized and constructed as 'other' both within the social formation at large and within schools themselves. Once it is accepted that schools operate as significant cultural sites in which the meanings of sexuality are constructed then it becomes necessary to address the precise ways in which schooling and school cultures operate to construct heterosexualities and homosexualities in relations of opposition and subordination.

(Redman, P. 1994, pg. 143-144)

### **Canadian Initiatives to Reduce Homophobia and Heterosexism in Education**

Heterosexual, lesbian, gay, and bisexual students would benefit from discussions regarding homosexuality in courses such as Family Studies, English Literature, Science, Art, Social Studies, and Drama. Many teachers and parents feel the education system should encourage respect and tolerance for all minorities; yet, name-calling such as 'faggot', 'dyke', and 'queer' is sanctioned in classrooms (Unks, 1994). Neither tolerance nor respect is encouraged for our lesbian and gay population. However, many of our youth are aware of their homosexual feelings during our sexuality classes. Anderson

(1994) reported that gay males tend to be aware of their sexual feelings from 12-14 years old, while lesbians are aware from 14-16 years old. Not only are these youth aware; many also act on these feelings. Saghir & Robbins (1973) found that twenty-four percent of lesbians and eighty percent of gay males have been sexually active by the age of fifteen. All students not only need sexuality education, but also education regarding gay and lesbian role models. Education and awareness may help alleviate some of the homophobia which presently permeates our high schools.

Another [in addition to workshops] important and effective method of counteracting homophobia is curriculum that acknowledges the presence and contributions of gay people. Whenever appropriate, classes should engage in discussions that air student fears and prejudices against gay people, dispel popular myths and convey basic facts about homosexuality. Classes should also convey accurate information on AIDS and risk-reduction behavior.

(Project 10 Handbook, pg. 45)

Anderson (1994) explains that while these youth may have same-sex attractions, they may not self-label as lesbian or gay. With no role models, support, nor education, a reluctance to call oneself lesbian or gay is understandable. Heterosexism in the curriculum sends a message to our lesbian and gay youth that "*You do not exist*". Clearly, *they do*. As educators it is time we address their needs.

Educators significantly influence the experiences of [gay and lesbian students] in school. *It is the educator who chooses how to teach the prescribed sexuality curriculum; it is the educator who challenges or winks at homophobic comments or jokes among students; it is the educator who comforts or ignores a student suffering from the heterosexist tirades of peers or doubts about her sexual identity; it is the educator who fosters dialogue among fellow professionals about the penalties all pay in a heterosexual-mandated society. Thus, it is to educators . . . and their*

beliefs and values to which we look for a reduction of heterosexual hegemony.

(Sears, 1991, pg. 61)

Some initiatives to improve education for gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth have been realized in large cities in Canada, unfortunately, not without resistance. The Triangle Program was formed as a result of the 1985 beating death of Kenneth Zellar, a school librarian in Toronto. The perpetrators, five high-school students, were reported as stating, hours before, that they were going to "beat up a faggot" (Hodder, 1997). This program provides a safe environment for students to study for up to eighteen months; with a curriculum that emphasizes the contributions of gays and lesbians to society. This year Toronto held its first gay and lesbian graduation dance, Pride Prom '97, which was officially sanctioned by a Canadian school board.

In February of '97 Calgary's Board of Education approved an "Action Plan on Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual Youth and Staff Safety". This plan requires guidance counsellors to provide comprehensive information to students discussing sexual orientation. A group called Parents' Rights in Education are planning to challenge this development (Dwyer, 1997).

Also this year, the British Columbia Teachers' Federation voted in favor of developing resources to address homophobia. Unfortunately, the Surrey School Board chose that time to ban materials that have been available in schools since 1995, including a pamphlet called "I Think I Might be Gay or Lesbian" and three storybooks for primary students, which depict gay parents. Also in the wake of the B.C. Teachers' Federation

initiative, The Citizens Research Institute in Langley, British Columbia, has distributed a "Declaration of Family Rights" to parents (Canadian Press, 1997). This states that children are not to be exposed to any activity or program which depicts gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people as normal or acceptable. *It further forbids teachers from reprimanding children for views which are supported by the family's cultural traditions, religious beliefs, or moral beliefs.*

*This backlash is frustrating and frightening. When I heard of this resistance from major centers in Alberta and British Columbia, I felt I had been expecting too much, too soon. At the same time, a family member argued that Newfoundland initiatives to improve the lives of gays and lesbians in the Newfoundland Education system were too little, too late. Mid-career teachers told me they had long ago accepted the oppression in their schools. However, stories from the next generation depict gays and lesbians who are not prepared to accept oppression. Instead, they are plunging forward with strength, vigour, and pride. They demand change. It is not too late for them.*



### **Chapter III**

#### **Methodology**

My theoretical perspective, which uncovers heterosexism and oppression in the education system, is feminist. Code (1994) argues that a sensitive feminist methodology is "... learning to see what is not there and hear what is not being said" (pg. 23).

Heterosexism is the result of patriarchal values; its purpose being to perpetuate what are in this culture, at present, traditional sex roles and families. Reinharz (1992) defines feminist research as that which criticizes non-feminist scholarship, and is guided by feminist theory. A social constructionist view of sexuality, homophobia, and heterosexism is in keeping with feminist theory. Biological essentialism and liberal-humanism maintain a blame-the-individual view. On the other hand, social constructionism criticizes the social and political structures which maintain patriarchy.

Reinharz (1992) also argues that feminist research represents human diversity. Lesbians and gays have been under represented in literature and the arts; in that while many have contributed in these areas, their sexual orientation has often been left unspoken. They are therefore assumed to be heterosexual. Lesbians and gays have also been denied legal and social rights. My research represents a group which is also under represented in our education system.

#### **Data Collection**

My source of data was qualitative in-depth interviewing with gay and lesbian

students and teachers. I followed the semi-structured general interview guide approach (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). In this way, while the questions are consistent for both groups of interviewees, the teachers and students were free to structure, shape, and organize their responses. The questions were used as a guide, and often took different directions for each subject.

I chose interviewing for several reasons. Reinharz (1992, pg. 18) states that interviewing "produces nonstandardized information that allows researchers to make full use of differences among people". Interviewing revealed different information teachers impart. All teachers have a standard curriculum to follow, however, lessons are taught differently from one teacher to another. Teachers bring their personal experiences, attitudes, and information related to a topic in unique ways; this is often referred to as the 'hidden' curriculum. While the informants and I have different experiences as both teachers and students, we also share similarities as homosexuals in the education system.

Two persons with somewhat similar experience, committed to the same movement (peace movement, women's movement, student rights, safety from violence), who have similar goals and may even know of each other. Both share information. The interviewer seeks permission to use information. Participant may see final research, be engaged in action at conclusion of research...become involved. The interviewer and participant do not remain strangers.

(Kirby & McKenna, (1989, pg. 69)

Another advantage pointed out by Reinharz (1992, pg. 19) is that "interviewing offers researchers access to people's ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher". Kirby & McKenna (1989, pg. 68) describe the

interview process as a "sharing of self...If the interaction between researcher and participant allows for an optimal degree of sharing, both may reach new personal and political insights in relation to the research focus." This is important when studying aspects of education, as teachers', and especially students' voices are *often ignored*.

Tierney (1994) argues that educational researchers must provide a voice and hope for those beset with oppression.

*By "hope" [Tierney] mean[s] the sense that the human potential might be reached where individual and communal differences are acknowledged and where we come together in the expectation that out of differences arises *communitas*.*

(pg. 112)

Most importantly, Reinhartz (1992) explains that interviewing avoids control by the researchers and develops a sense of connection with participants. Kirby & McKenna (1989, pg. 105) argue that "researching from the margins is best accomplished by those who live on the margins". Oakley, (1981, pg. 48) argues that "the interview is a discussion or guided conversation in which *both* the interviewer and the person being interviewed share information *and* contribute to the research process". As an interviewer, my role was threefold: to reflect with the participants our oppression as gays or lesbians involved in the education system, to write a thesis which uncovers heterosexism and homophobia in this system, and to actively work for change (Tierney, 1994). As a participant, a researcher's work "...seeks to unearth, disrupt, and transform existing ideological and/or institutional arrangements" (Fine, 1994, pg. 17).

### Selection of Participants

Because of the unique risks lesbians and gays feel in being interviewed, and in spite of my promise to ensure their confidentiality, it was difficult to locate potential participants. I was compelled therefore to use an availability sample, whereby interviews were conducted with those readily willing to participate. This type of sample places some limitations on my study since it is not fully representative of the wide variety of experiences of gays and lesbians.

A gay and lesbian youth group, which I help coordinate, provided me with a sufficient number of youth to interview for a qualitative study. However, this group is out to many friends and their families. Their experiences may differ greatly from a gay or lesbian youth who is afraid to be out to others. Similarly, the teachers who partook in my study are acquaintances and are involved in the lesbian and gay communities. Their experiences may also differ greatly from a gay or lesbian teacher who is not involved in the gay or lesbian communities.

Only one youth who partook in the study was under sixteen years old, and was therefore required to gain permission from her parents. All informants were read the consent form (see Appendix C), and it was explained to them. Interviews were conducted in my home. I felt this was the best location for several reasons. Firstly, youths' homes and schools are inaccessible, as many would not be at ease in these places. Secondly, the university would have been too formal a setting for many, especially high school students. Finally, the youths indicated that they felt a sense of anonymity in my home. The

interviews with teachers were conducted in my home or theirs; whichever place was most comfortable for the participants. The consent form (see Appendix C) was also explained to them.

### **Introduction to Participants (Teachers)**

I currently understand the powerlessness lesbian and gay teachers feel in being unable to come out and support homosexual youth for fear of losing their jobs, or of being perceived as recruiting students to become gay or lesbian. Therefore, throughout this thesis I have become a participant, in that I share my experiences as a lesbian teacher.

At the time this research was conducted, Newfoundland schools were classified by denominations; a system protected by Term 17 in Newfoundland's Terms of Union with Canada (Our Children, Our Future, 1992). The governance and operation of the education system are shared among a non-denominational Department of Education, the school boards, and the *Denominational Educational Councils*. There are five educational councils: Integrated (Anglican, Salvation Army, United, Presbyterian, and Moravian), Roman Catholic, Pentecostal Assemblies, and Seventh Day Adventist. Gay and lesbian teachers fear losing their jobs due to the right of denominational school boards to fire a teacher on the basis of personal lifestyle (Shortall, 1997).

Schools operate under boards governed by by-laws which exclude teachers from the Provincial Human Rights' Code. For example, The Roman Catholic School Board, under by-law #1, (4), Teacher Credibility, states that personal lifestyle has an impact upon

a teacher's credibility with youth. By-law # 1, (6), Incompatibility further threatens the gay or lesbian teacher by its implicit message to us:

(6) A Roman Catholic teacher in the schools operated by this board is expected to abide by the laws and regulations common to all members of the Catholic Church and by word and example to encourage students to do likewise. When such a teacher employed by this board acts in flagrant and explicit contradiction with fundamental Roman Catholic values or with the official teachings of the Magisterium or with the educational objectives of the Roman Catholic Church, that action is incompatible with the continued exercise of the teacher's function in a school operated by this board.

(By-Law Number 1, pg. 3)

While none of these by-laws directly refer to gay and lesbian teachers, (nor are they limited to us) teachers employed under this board are often afraid to challenge its implications. Furthermore, teachers working for other boards in Newfoundland share the same fears as those of the Roman Catholic teacher. While the Integrated school boards have no similar by-laws, teachers may still be afraid to admit their same-sex orientation. Khayat (1992, pg. 5) explains that "teachers in general are hired in conformity with an assumed standard. They are expected, to some extent, to reflect a conventionality that corresponds with the states ideologically sanctioned model of behavior". Gay and lesbian teachers therefore feel at risk of being fired if discovered. My participants included three teachers from Integrated schools and one teacher from a Roman Catholic school. All teachers work at urban schools: one teacher in Mount Pearl while the others are in St. John's. I interviewed four lesbian and gay teachers; a total of four teachers. Following is

a brief description of the participants:<sup>11</sup>

### **1. Marie**

Marie, a lesbian, is a grade seven special education teacher. She has taught English, Math, Health, and Science for twelve years with a local school board. She has been in her present school, which has a staff of forty-two teachers, for three years. Marie has a Bachelor of Arts, a Bachelor of Education, and a Bachelor of Special Education.

### **2. Christine**

Christine, a lesbian, is a high school teacher with a school which has a teaching staff of approximately forty teachers. Christine has been teaching English Language and Literature in this school for five years. Previously she taught in another school for two years. Christine has a Bachelor of Arts, a Bachelor of Education, and a Master of Education.

### **3. Nancy**

Nancy, a lesbian, is a guidance counsellor for kindergarten to grade eight students in a school with a local school board. She has been a guidance counsellor for thirteen years; this is her fourth year in her present job. She serves two schools; one with eighteen teachers and the other with twenty-one. While she doesn't teach specific courses, Nancy *has taught some self-esteem and conflict resolution classes to primary students, and career awareness classes to junior high students.* Nancy has a Bachelor of Arts and a Master of

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<sup>11</sup>The names given are pseudonyms.

Educational Psychology.

#### **4. David**

David, a gay male, is a librarian in a high school with a local school board. He teaches one course, a Level II language course. David has been teaching fifteen years; ten of which have been at his present school. There are approximately forty teachers on staff. He holds a Bachelor of Arts, a Bachelor of Education, and Master of Learning Resources.

#### **Introduction to Participants (Students)**

My participants included one student from an Integrated school, two students from Roman Catholic schools, and one student from a non-denominational school under the responsibility of the Department of Education. All students attend urban schools.

I interviewed four lesbian and gay teens (including one recent graduate); a total of four youths. All interviews were confidential as gay and lesbian youth are at risk if they come out to their families and friends. As noted earlier, teens coming out to their parents face the real possibility of being thrown out of their homes. Violence and harassment toward gay and lesbian youth is common (Project 10 Handbook, 1989).

#### **1. Stephen**

Stephen is a seventeen-year-old gay male attending a non-denominational school, with an enrollment of 110 students and grades ranging from kindergarten to Level III. He chose this school seeking a different life; he felt he was suffering in the community in which he lived and the school he was attending. He described himself as an average



student; neither overly popular nor a loner. He feels he is academically oriented, and fears living as a blue-collar worker with a low income. Stephen is interested in his courses, but is frustrated with the way the education system ignores gay, lesbian, and bisexual students. He feels he cannot be who he wants in front of his peers. In his previous school, Stephen felt he was considered a behavior problem. He was continuously seeking attention; which he stated was self-destructive. He reported that the attention-seeking behavior arose out of confusion around *his sexuality and self-identity*. *Many hours were spent in detention hall or the guidance counsellor's office because of his refusal to work.* By contrast, Stephen feels he has a good relationship with teachers at his new school and was elected by his peers and teachers last year to be the President of the Student Council.

## **2. Ellen**

Ellen is a fifteen-year-old lesbian who attends an integrated school with an enrollment of approximately 600 students. She did not choose this school; it was determined by her place of residence. *She described herself as somewhere in between* being popular and a loner, but indicated that the group of friends she has at school are "superficial". Ellen feels she is a low-achiever, in that most of her accomplishments are outside of school. She reported that she has a difficult time in school because of her refusal to conform to the "values of the teachers." She continuously struggles between who she wants to be and who the education system coerces her to be. Ellen reported that her strongest courses are in Spanish and Language; Spanish because there are lots of smart girls in her class, and Language because this course allows her to write about topics

of her own choosing. She feels she is probably considered by some teachers as a behavior problem, while other teachers may perceive her as quiet. Ellen indicated that teachers' perceptions of her may depend on how much she "lets her views known in a particular class". She is not involved in any extra-curricular activities, however, she is very active and an activist outside school. Ellen is a member of YSJ (Youth for Social Justice), and LGBQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Questioning Youth Group); and is a disc jockey for CHMR, Memorial University's student radio program. She also joined the Provincial Strategy Against Violence. Ellen was recently elected as the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Director of NDP (New Democratic Party) Youth of Canada. She described herself as being involved in anything that is outside of school.

### **3. Janet**

Janet is an 18-year-old lesbian who attends a Roman Catholic school with an enrollment of approximately 600 students. She chose this school because she was not fond of the reputation of the for which she was zoned. She described herself as someone with a small group of friends. Janet reported that she is a low-achiever; this is her fourth year of high school and she often skips classes. If she doesn't pass, she will be back again next year. She isn't interested in any extra-curricular activities or activist work. Janet feels content enough with her programs, as she is only required to pass math and history; she has the other credits necessary to acquire a high school diploma. She has a fair relationship with her teachers and feels her courses are somewhat interesting. Janet plans to pursue a career in computers from a local college.

#### 4. Andrew

Andrew is an 18-year-old gay male who graduated from a Roman Catholic school in 1996; an institution with an enrollment of approximately 650 students. He was designated to attend this school from elementary school, but had a choice to leave after Level I. He chose to stick with it. Andrew described himself as a loner until Level II, and feels he later became really popular when he started hanging out with some of the popular girls. He didn't care much about school, but recognizes the importance of a good education. Andrew feels he had a good relationship with his teachers; while he described himself as a clown, he said he was not a bad behavior problem. He feels he was frustrated only when teachers were racist, sexist, or homophobic. Andrew was involved in activities both inside and outside of school. He was in the school band as a trombone player, the chamber choir, the improv team, the music theatre group, and the Peace for Social Justice Committee. Outside of school YSJ (Youth for Social Justice), LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Questioning Youth Group), and NGALE (Newfoundland Gays and Lesbians for Equality) have kept him on the front lines for social change. He reported becoming involved in band and music because it was fun, and political action because it needed to be done.

I ensured the confidentiality of all students and teachers by keeping the audio cassettes locked in my filing cabinet in my office at home. I will keep the tapes until my thesis is completed, examined, and accepted by the university. At that time, I will destroy all tapes.

## Interview Questions

As stated earlier, interviews were guided by the following questions:

1. What experiences have gay and lesbian students and teachers encountered in the education system?
2. What have gay and lesbian students and teachers learned and taught about homosexuality in courses?
3. In the views of gay and lesbian students and teachers, what curriculum changes would help decrease homophobia and/or heterosexism in our school system?

## Analysis

In analyzing the interviews I tried to determine what aspects of gay and lesbian experiences need to be addressed in the curriculum. I used an inductive approach to the data analysis, whereby categories and themes emerge from the data (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). In seeking an emergent theory (Graves, 1995) aimed at detecting and reconstructing homophobia and heterosexism in the education system, I did not predict differences between the teachers and students, but rather looked for themes to emerge from the data which would support both the theoretical perspectives and lay the foundation for practical implications.

The following themes emerged as most significant: coming out, homophobia and heterosexism in school, knowledge and attitudes regarding lesbian and gay issues, what is formally taught and learned in school regarding gay and lesbian issues, and curriculum changes recommended by participants. These or other themes that exist in the findings

will be developed in the next chapter of this thesis. Other changes recommended in the education system are suggested in the practical implications section of the final chapter of this thesis.

## **Challenges**

Challenges came from my family, some colleagues, and some of the lesbian community. To investigate such a controversial topic places me at risk professionally. While I am out to my present colleagues, my research outs me further. However, many lesbians and gays recognize that coming out is a lifelong process. When we change jobs, or when new in-laws are added to our families of orientation, and when we meet new friends, we constantly face disclosure again. This continuous outing and educating our new family members often takes emotional energy.

Not all lesbian and heterosexual friends offer emotional support for my topic. Most feel I am acting as a sacrificial lamb. They are afraid I may lose my job for 'the cause'. Some heterosexual colleagues feel I am working from nothing more than a personal agenda on an irrelevant issue. In some ways I felt I was experiencing what Kitzinger (1987) has described. She argues that the discipline of psychology has placed much emphasis on depoliticizing lesbianism through individualizing the lesbian, instead of recognizing the social construction of her.

The subjectivities constituted by contemporary psychology reflect its own insistent emphasis on the 'personal' as opposed to the political, and it is these depoliticized subjectivities that are promoted in contemporary liberal-humanistic (so-call 'gay affirmative') research. Much of this research

fosters absorption in the 'essential self' of the lesbian, located in a 'private' sphere only tangentially related to the public and political. Through a focus on the privatized 'true self' of the lesbian, in which her 'real' identity is located, psychologists promote such 'human' goals as self-actualization, self-fulfilment, and personal happiness for lesbians, thus emphasizing person-change rather than system-change, and distracting attention from the sociopolitical and institutional aspects of lesbian oppression and the lesbian threat.

(pg. 39)

Many lesbian and gay teachers feel guilty about not being able to be honest to colleagues and students about their sexuality. Hopefully, I was able to affirm that their fears are real, while supporting them in their willingness to share their experiences for the purpose of this project.

Notwithstanding the above concerns and challenges, I hope my thesis will benefit both the educators and lesbian and gay youth of our province and elsewhere. It certainly served as an educational, enlightening, and worthwhile process for me.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Findings**

This chapter is arranged in three sections; each section responds to one research question and its appropriate themes. In the first section I discuss experiences lesbian and gay students and teachers face at school. Relevant to this topic are coming out stories and experiences of homophobic attitudes, comments, and behaviors by other students or teachers. The second section investigates classes taught on the topic of homosexuality. I report what knowledge and attitudes students and teachers have on lesbian and gay issues, and where this information was acquired. I also relate what gay and lesbian teachers have discussed, and what students have learned about homosexuality in their classes. The final section of this chapter reports the curriculum changes gay and lesbian students and teachers feel are necessary to help decrease homophobia and heterosexism in our school system.

While I have used pseudonyms, I have given a name to each of the subjects. I felt *this was important for several reasons*. The stories from subjects are so diverse; the level of homophobia experienced by some students and teachers is in great contrast with that experienced by others. I also felt the readers would be interested in following individual stories. Finally, I wanted to personalize this thesis. The struggles, strengths, and coping strategies warrant each participant having a voice.

#### **I. Experiences of Lesbian and Gay Students and Teachers**

### **(a) Coming Out of the Classroom Closet**

To come out of the closet is a metaphor which describes lesbians, gays, and bisexuals disclosing their sexual orientation to family, friends, or co-workers (Marcus, 1993). Coming out is difficult for everyone, particularly young people. While self-esteem is an issue for all teens, the gay, lesbian, or bisexual youth must confront the possibility of not being accepted because of his or her sexual orientation.

Marcus (1993) outlines three primary reasons that gay and lesbian people stay in the closet: necessity, fear, and a desire not to discuss their sexuality with others. Some gays and lesbians would lose their jobs, or be kicked out of their homes if their sexual orientation was discovered. Others fear rejection by family, friends, or co-workers, or even physical or verbal harassment. Not surprisingly, many people wait until adulthood to come out to heterosexuals, while others stay in the closet all of their lives.

Marcus (1993) asserts that gays and lesbians often choose to disclose their sexual orientation because they want to be themselves and be honest with people they care about. *Finally, he claims that it can be difficult, emotionally exhausting, and destructive to keep this part of one's life a secret.*

### **(i) teachers**

*All teachers have a formal curriculum to follow with concrete and abstract goals to be attained during the school year. Some of us teach some courses driven by passion, while others are a chore. No two teachers follow a curriculum in the same way, as our*



personal bias is always evident. Interaction between students and teachers also impacts on the success or boredom of a particular course. Over the course of a year, teachers and students get to know each other. Questions about marriage, dating, and families are common in a classroom setting. Students often know where a teacher lives, how many children she or he has, a spouse's career, and places a teacher frequents.

In my classes all students know that my "roommate's" name is Sue, that we share a house, and we have a dog named Rosie. I constantly bring up their names during discussions of family, and they have begun to ask me questions about Sue. Students tease me about not being a true feminist when I admit to doing most of the cooking while Sue always shovels. I certainly thought about talking about my family prior to any such discussions. When teaching Family Life, Peer Counselling, and Adolescence, sharing is imperative. Without interactive discussions, the class is impersonal and stifling.

Unfortunately, bringing up Sue's name has raised the eyebrow of more than one teacher on my staff. Some educators share the notion that lesbian and gay teachers want to come out to students to recruit them, and if we do talk about our personal lives, somehow we are talking about what we do in the bedroom. As gay and lesbian teachers are a part of this larger group of educators, many of them also believe our personal lives should be left outside the classroom door. A Newfoundlander teaching in Toronto recently told me that she has no desire to come out to her students; she feels it would be immoral. "What I do in bed is nobody's business; certainly not my students". "Teacher by day, lesbian by night" is a common expression used jokingly by people in the lesbian

community. It implies that being a lesbian and a teacher are, or are constructed as being, in opposition to each other.

The teachers' coming out stories were filled with pain or compliance. None of the teachers I spoke with were out to their full staff. The suitability clause in the Newfoundland Teacher's Contract, outlined earlier, is obviously a constant threat to the jobs of most gay and lesbian teachers. As reported earlier, Griffin (1991) argues that gay and lesbian teachers *make themselves an invisible group. We constantly fear being outed* by an unfriendly colleague, a student, or a parent. When Marie was harassed about her sexual orientation by a co-worker, she felt so threatened she contacted the Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association.

About four years ago I was advised by the NLTA that if I was questioned [about my sexual orientation] not to say anything; to contact them first. They said something about our contract that gave the churches the power over all teachers; not just catholic teachers.

Aware that while this clause has silenced them, most teachers will not go to work everyday in fear. David, who was once married, refuses to let disclosure of his homosexuality silence him anymore.

I would like to believe that a teacher couldn't be fired for being gay. My ex-wife has been very bitter at times. For the first few years that I was separated, on more than one occasion when she wasn't happy with the amount of child support I was giving, she would threaten me. She used to say, *I could easily phone your school board and let them know you're gay*. When she blackmailed me, I always gave in because that was the last thing I wanted at that time in my life. It affected my life being a gay teacher. The way I feel right now is she could call Tobin [Premier of Newfoundland and Labrador] and I wouldn't care. I would do whatever I could to fight for my job.

Nancy recognizes the oppression she endures because of being a lesbian teacher.

That's why I don't come out to a lot of teachers; knowing that I could lose my job. I've said to one of the teachers that the day I feel things have changed, I'm going to stand on the staff room table and make an announcement.

Whether they still fear losing their jobs or not, the teachers I interviewed are not comfortable coming out to everyone on staff. Similar to teachers in other provinces (Khayatt, 1992) and other countries (Olson, 1987), they are afraid of the negative reactions by their colleagues. Christine is one such teacher.

I want to be seen as a teacher who pulls her weight and contributes to a school community. I want to be seen as a teacher who is prepared for class, and is interested in extra-curricular activities, and is good at what she does. Those things are important to me. I don't want to be known as a lesbian school teacher in the system.

I believe Christine's fears are valid. I am perceived by some colleagues as a lesbian feminist first; my contributions to the school seem secondary. Christine believes that unfortunately our school system does not appear to allow for a teacher to be both a lesbian and a good teacher.

Even though none of the teachers want to be out to everyone, they do feel a need to be out to some. Until they came out to a chosen few, teachers reported feeling like outsiders in their own staff rooms. Marie felt especially isolated until she disclosed her sexual orientation to co-workers at her school.

I can talk about my partner now, whereas before I couldn't. I'd be sitting there not saying a word while they were talking about what they did on the weekend. I got so tired of saying nothing that I told five or six of them, so that I could exist.

David too recognizes the isolation, and also how far gay and lesbian teachers go to keep our lives a secret.

When people say, 'What did you do on the weekend?' you don't want to say a movie because if they ask with who, then you know the wheels are going to start turning and that's the part I find most difficult. You are never, ever yourself like they are. We magnify the secret, because anything could lead into another question; so we magnify it by not even saying we went to a movie. We're such boring people.

Christine came out to teachers she saw socially, people with whom she had developed a working friendship, and people she respected professionally.

You know you choose your people very wisely. If anything [not coming out] made me feel - it's not dishonest - it's like sins of omission; passing over details of your personal life. For me, friendship could indeed be hampered by my not telling them.

Nancy felt it would be inappropriate to disclose her sexuality to students. It is probably not possible to listen to heterosexist comments without believing some of them to be true. Nancy, like many others, feels that to tell her students she is lesbian, is not equal to telling them about a husband or wife.

Even if we were protected [from losing our jobs] I wouldn't come out to my students because I just feel that's talking about my sexuality and I think that's inappropriate. Maybe I feel that way because I'm a guidance counsellor.

However, when I asked her if it was appropriate for a guidance counsellor to have a picture of his wife and children on his desk, Nancy had this to say:

I was thinking of sitting down on a one-on-one session; but to have a picture on your desk of your partner...I never thought of that. I suppose it's so far from our reality that you don't bother. We don't want to bother because it would just make us mad.

It obviously didn't take Nancy long to realize she had bought into heterosexist values.

Clearly, gay and lesbian teachers spend an exorbitant amount of energy dealing with unexpected questions pertaining to their personal lives. Some teachers cut their answers short, some avoid the questions, while others answer them indirectly (Khayatt, 1992). *None of the teachers I interviewed has ever come out to any of their students, nor any students to them. While none of them are willing to risk coming out themselves, they all feel that coming out is important politically. Marie feels coming out to students would make a tremendous difference to gay and lesbian students, to heterosexual students, and to herself.*

[Coming out] is extremely important. Gay and lesbian students need to see there are healthy role models out there. We need to break down the stereotypes for all students - not just the gay and lesbian ones - but those who are extremely prejudiced. Everyday I hear words like 'faggot' and 'queer'. These students don't know normal people are homosexual.

But I also feel it's important to come out so I can live. I've been asked so many times questions like, 'Are you married?', 'Do you have a boyfriend?', and all I can really say to them is, 'That's my personal life'. *I usually get comments like, 'Oh, that's silly. I know about all the other teachers. We don't know anything about you Miss'. I'm teaching Special Ed and have a small group. The first couple of months you establish a relationship that is very important in order to be successful. If I could talk about my life, I know it would only enhance our student-teacher relationship. Saying I'm a lesbian does not mean discussing my bedroom activities. It allows me to exist, to discuss what I did on the weekend, and to talk about my family life like every straight teacher.*

The emotional impact of Marie's secret is evident; she does not feel she even exists without telling her secret.

On the other hand, Christine indicated that she has found a comfortable balance regarding the amount of information she discloses about her personal life to her students.

I don't want to be out to my students. Obviously you tell students anecdotes about friends or holidays or things that you've done with your life. When teaching English, you draw on that stuff a fair bit. I haven't had a lot of questions about my life; whatever I give off must tell my students I don't want to. I'm not an unapproachable kind of teacher. I'm not the kind of teacher that has students lined up after school to talk about boyfriend or girlfriend troubles. I have people come to me with career concerns, letters of reference, and information on journalism schools. That suits me just fine.

Perhaps the reason students are not "lined up after school to talk about boyfriend and girlfriend troubles" is because Christine has not shared her personal life with them. While Christine is comfortable with her relationships with students, I wonder if she would feel differently if she were heterosexual.

Many teachers would never come out because they fear that students would use this information against them, or that they would lose credibility in their teaching. David feels this way.

If a lot of kids at school knew I was gay and were hassling me, I wouldn't want to be in the job. If they are calling me a faggot in the classroom, or in the library, or in the corridors, I couldn't handle that. If I take a kid and kick him out of the library because of something he is doing, and then he says, 'Go away you faggot', I would feel I can't do this anymore. I couldn't be authoritative with the kids anymore. That's why I don't want kids in the school to know; not even those I know to be gay themselves.

While it is possible that a few students may taunt teachers because of their homosexuality, I feel students who respect and admire a particular teacher would continue to do so after teachers disclosed their sexual orientation. After some of my students saw

me on the evening news during the Lesbian and Gay Pride March, two students approached me and asked if I was okay. When I asked why, they informed me that all of the students were talking about me being on television. They were genuinely concerned. Further, no student hassled me, nor spoke an unkind word. Like me, Marie feels there would be no negative consequences from the students by coming out.

If I came out and said I was a lesbian to my students, they would accept me. They know me and have a lot of respect for me, as I do them. However, their parents might say, 'I don't want a lesbian teaching my son or daughter', or that I was recruiting young people to be gay or lesbian. So it would be the parents, more so than the students, who would want me out of the school.

Marie's concerns are probably valid. As previously discussed, the recent backlash in British Columbia has resulted in a document called "Declaration of Family Rights", which has been sent to all parents in Langley, B.C. The document forbids students from being exposed to any information which depicts gays and lesbians as normal or acceptable. Many parents fear the gay agenda includes recruiting their children to become gay or lesbian.

Some teachers, like Nancy, feel guilty about staying in the closet. She used to lobby for lesbian and gay rights before she became a teacher, and recognized the importance of everyone being out, and working toward change.

When I first started teaching I was very out. It was an issue between myself and my partner, who was very out and very political. I couldn't be out anymore. She found that difficult, and so did I. I still find sometimes politically that I'm being a traitor, haven't come out when I should, and speak out like I did years ago.

## **(ii) students**

While the teachers' coming out stories were filled with pain or compliance, the students' stories were filled with hope and confidence. However, the students I interviewed are not representative of most teens. They are all very brave, confident, and nonconforming. All are members of LGBQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Questioning) Youth Group, and some are politically active in trying to improve the status of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals in this province. Everyone is out to his or her parents, and feels either totally or somewhat supported by them. They are all out to some heterosexual friends and peers, and some are even out to their teachers.

I was the first person Stephen came out to over a year ago. At that time he was struggling with repeated thoughts of suicide because of his sexual orientation. Stephen approached me because he suspected that I was a lesbian; it was rumoured around the school. "You made me feel that it was okay; you were happy with your life." Since that time Stephen has come out to his parents (who apparently knew since he was nine years old), other teachers, and other school staff. He has written many research papers on gay and lesbian issues. In June, Stephen presented a computer slide show during Family Life class on the sitcom "Ellen". This show featured Ellen DeGeneres' character, Ellen, coming out. Stephen presented this topic to the junior and senior high school students and teachers, which took courage, as many students rumor Stephen to be gay, while there are others who know this to be true. Stephen feels coming out has been a very positive



experience.

I don't have to state it anymore; it seems [the staff] know. I notice they have changed their language; like they say if you're going out with a girl you have to plan it a couple of days ahead - or even if it's with a guy.

Nearly all of the peers Stephen has come out to are female. He feels they are less homophobic and more open-minded. He has come out to some males, however, he fears if too many know "then [his] life will be destroyed at school".

Ellen is out to a small group of immediate friends at school, a few bisexuals, and a couple of teachers. She indicated that her friends' responses varied. Some of them seemed a little hesitant to talk to her initially, while other closer friends stuck by her. One friend with whom she has had sleepovers was shocked, and for a long while Ellen found it really difficult to talk to her.

Coming out to teachers has not been as positive an experience for Ellen as it has been for Stephen. One teacher Ellen assumed was a "modern guy" shocked her.

I showed him this document from the United States on school violence against gay and lesbian youth. I mentioned to him about the LGBQ [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Questioning] Youth Group, after which he stated that he believed the gay and lesbian movement recruits children.

The belief that adult gays and lesbians try to recruit children to become homosexual is a popular myth (Blumenfeld, 1992). Inconsistently, many of these same people believe that homosexuality is biologically fixed at birth.

Fortunately, Ellen reported the incident to her mother, who in turn spoke to the

Vice-Principal. Ellen feels she has since been treated differently; almost with "kid gloves".

The vice-principal has invited her into his office to make sure everything at school is fine, and told her he felt the school is a fairly tolerant place.

And that word tolerance stuck in my head, because it's not tolerant; it's just silent. You don't talk about these things. I don't think he has heard all the comments about gays that teachers hear all the time in the classroom. When I mentioned that he said that's how jokes go; what can you do sort of thing. I had that feeling of helplessness and hopelessness. I think he could do something about it.

The language used by Ellen's vice-principal could be interpreted as personal homophobia (Blumenfeld, 1992). Gays and lesbians want more than tolerance; to be 'put up with'. Even though this vice-principal tried to explain to Ellen that everyone was accepted for who they are, he dismissed anti-gay jokes as harmless. When administration provides no support for gay and lesbian students, other students are sent a covert message that homophobic acts are acceptable. As previously discussed, Sarachild (1975) claims that blaming the individual, as opposed to the institution, functions to stop the oppressed from rebelling. Instead of blaming the homophobia on the institution, he trivialized such actions. While Ellen viewed the vice-principal as having the power to control such acts from reoccurring, he simply explained a few jokes by a few students were out of his control; "What can you do?". Perhaps Ellen could do nothing, but her vice-principal certainly could. He chose not to.

No gay, lesbian, or bisexual youth lives without the fear and threat of violence. Ellen came out to some bisexuals at her school; not because they were friends, but rather for support.

We're not really good friends. I basically form a support group wherever I go - a group of contacts - just in case something happens to me that there are people that I can go to.

Many gays and lesbians do not have to come out for people to know they are homosexuals. Janet seems to have come out at school without much stress. While a friend at that same school will not come out in fear of being gay-bashed, Janet is out to about twenty or thirty students, and does not care about harassment. She felt people knew anyway, so her lesbianism was not a surprise to these students.

An interesting coming out story was shared by Andrew; whose vibrant personality and passion for attention are evident in everything he does. Andrew came out first at *Youth for Social Justice (YSJ) camp*.

I was fifteen, and dropping hints like crazy. Some friends came to chat with me and see if I was okay. I was acting strange, and they asked me if I was gay. I said, 'Sure, of course I am', and then I was running up and down the halls screaming because I was so happy. Everyone was saying, 'He's gay, he's gay, he finally said it'. So I was really happy.

Andrew's sense of relief is common for people coming out (Bass & Kaufman, 1996). No longer does his life have to remain a secret, and Andrew's friends did not reject him.

After disclosing to his friends of YSJ, Andrew came out to his friends downtown, and then to everyone at his Roman Catholic school, "piece by piece; first people that [he] knew well; then people [he] didn't know that well". He feels there is not anyone he has not told. While coming out has been a very positive experience for Andrew, he does feel he lost one good friend prior to outing himself.

I lost my best friend. We were friends from grade one to grade eight. I

would go over to his house and we'd stay inside on sunny days drawing. In grade nine he ditched me. I didn't know why. I had to get new friends and hang out downtown. We started talking again in grade twelve and he told me he didn't want to ditch me, but his parents threatened him that if he was gay, they were going to kick him out of the house. They didn't want him hanging around with me.

Unlike Andrew's parents, this boy not only had no support from parents, but was threatened by them. Unfortunately, he was feeling too threatened to stay friends with Andrew. He has since come out to Andrew, indicating that he is bisexual, but stated he would never tell anyone else. The depth of this boy's secret is dangerous. Low self-esteem, social isolation, depression, negative family interactions, and negative social attitudes are associated with lesbian and gay suicide (Proctor & Groze, 1994). Conversely, when youth feel they have the support of family and friends, self-esteem is heightened and isolation and depression is lowered.

Andrew's level of self-acceptance, his flamboyant personality, and the support of his parents enabled him to come out in a way that perhaps no gay or lesbian youth has ever done in Newfoundland. Gay and lesbian teens taking same-sex dates to their high school proms is not common (Marcus, 1993). The best known incident occurred in 1980 on Rhode Island, when Aaron Fricke sued his high school, and consequently won the right to take a boy to his prom (Fricke, 1981).

In 1996 Andrew went to his prom with a same-sex date.

I was thinking about it for so long. My dad said he would understand if I wanted to bring my boyfriend; but the fact that it didn't matter which boy, meant I was using my ideas as weapons. I was really upset at the time. The prom is a breeder parade. If everyone was going to show off their

heteromate, why shouldn't I show off my homomate?

Interestingly, if Andrew had been heterosexual and brought 'any girl' to his prom, it is unlikely that his father would have felt Andrew was using his heterosexual ideas as weapons. One of Andrew's teachers phoned his father to reassure him that the boys would be safe. The teacher argued that his father should let Andrew go, as "these are the 90s." The teacher reported that the school would handle any unforeseen problems. Andrew's flamboyance was evident at his senior prom.

I had to make the grand entrance. I couldn't wear my mother's wedding dress, but I wanted to wear something that belonged to her. She had this beautiful dark green velvet cape, and underneath I wore a tuxedo I bought at the Salvation Army for twenty dollars, a gay pride rainbow scarf, a blue sparkle vest, black patent-leather pants, and brown sandals. I was voted best-dressed and prom king. There were rumours going crazy that I wasn't voted king, but rather prom queen. It was one of the best nights of my life.

While Andrew and his date faced a few stares during their waltzes, the night was one Andrew will remember forever. He should. Andrew won the admiration and jealousy of our community, as many gay and lesbian adults have shared painful high school prom stories.

While Andrew's school was supportive, another Catholic school in St. John's dismissed the idea of gay and lesbian students being afforded equality. Andrew reported that at this school the principal said the first week during assembly that they wouldn't be having any of 'that same-sex prom stuff'. Obviously, this principal had heard about Andrew and his prom date.

Andrew hopes that his coming out has impacted on others in the downtown area

to feel comfortable about their sexual orientation. When he told his friends three years ago, he knew of no other gay, lesbian, or bisexual youth. He admitted that most of his weekend evenings were spent 'growing up' at the local gay bar. Since that time, many youths have come out in the downtown area.

I didn't know anybody downtown to come out at my age, and then when I did, many people started identifying as gay, lesbian or bisexual. It's not like I started a wave or something, but it has influenced some people. If I helped some come out of the closet, I'm so glad of that.

While Andrew feels he has influenced others to come out, unfortunately others may probably perceive him as influencing other youths to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual; i.e as recruiting.

Andrew has not only influenced youths. For two years he has been on television rallying at the Lesbian and Gay Pride March. He has lobbied the Liberal caucus to have sexual orientation written into the Human Rights Code. I have recently begun working with him on the Advisory Committee with the Provincial Strategy Against Violence. Andrew holds the respect of youths and adults alike.

To come out of the classroom closet is difficult for both students and teachers. For the teachers I interviewed, the fear of losing their jobs and credibility, or being hassled by students or colleagues, outweighed the consequence of isolation and continuously dodging the truth. The students, on the other hand, are growing up fighting for gay and lesbian rights, refusing to accept oppression. Interestingly, many gay and lesbian students face isolation because of their honesty about their lives, while teachers face isolation

because of their secrecy about their lives.

### **(b) Homophobia and Heterosexism in School**

Homophobia refers to active and explicit attacks on lesbians, gays, and bisexuals. These attacks may be verbal or physical, and are often fuelled by unacknowledged motives and/or panic (Epstein & Johnson, 1994). Heterosexism, on the other hand, is silent; a presumption of heterosexuality which tends to ignore the possibility of any other sexuality.

Newfoundland schools appear to fuel both institutional and cultural homophobia. As discussed in the literature review, institutional homophobia is described by Blumenfeld (1992) as the ways government, businesses, and educational institutions systematically discriminate against gays and lesbians. As schools are institutions produced by a society where homophobia and heterosexism are present, so too are they present and reproduced by our schools. Newfoundland is different than many other provinces in Canada, as the churches are major power brokers in controlling our schools. Therefore, religious organizations also impart institutional homophobia in our schools.

### **(i) teachers**

Very different levels of homophobia and heterosexism were experienced by my informants, in different schools. While only one teacher endured blatant homophobic harassment, the absence of any reference to homosexuality in other schools can be interpreted as subtle heterosexism. All teachers in these schools are socially constructing heterosexuality as the only acceptable sexual orientation.

The only teacher who has experienced personal verbal attacks is Marie. She was harassed so much at one school that she changed schools at the end of her first year there. The incident appears to have escalated after Marie refused to stay silent during the homophobic remarks a colleague was expressing.

I was losing a couple of friends through the AIDS virus; one was Tommy Sexton - the actor from CODCO. I remember walking into the staff room one morning and [teacher] was saying he was glad that Tommy was dying of AIDS; it was God's punishment to gays and the way God was going to wipe out the homosexuals of the world. So I said to him, 'Do you have a problem with gay people?', and that was when he jumped on the bandwagon and said, 'Of course I got a problem with fucking gay people! Who are you - the fucking moral police'?

Unfortunately, the attacks did not end that day. In fact, it continued almost everyday in the staff room at lunch time. Marie's colleagues explained to her that the only time this colleague abused gays and lesbians was in her presence; that he was just trying to "egg Marie on". Some of his derogatory comments included, "I wonder if any fags died last night", and "Are you [Marie] a woman or man today?". She reported him to administration, who told her they would have a chat with him, but to basically try to avoid him. Marie was afraid to report this man to the school board; fearing they would discover her sexual orientation. Interestingly, no other teacher reported him either.

*I had to go to the (Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association) NLTA about him. I was told that they could send him a letter of warning. After that happened, I went and confronted him and told him that if I heard any more remarks about gays and lesbians, I was going to charge him with sexual harassment. I warned him that I had been to the NLTA, and that day it stopped.*

While the abuse stopped for Marie, her colleague also has quite a reputation with the



students. Marie reported that she was told of homophobic comments and jokes about females with blonde hair by some of the students.

This man taught Literature. I expected more from someone who taught that sort of subject. When you think of the impact he would have on a gay or lesbian student, it's frightening.

The impact this colleague had on Marie is frightening. Had she been a heterosexual facing such accusations, Marie would probably not have felt so powerless. Instead, not only did Marie feel she had to leave the school, but her colleague is now free to continue abusing others; perhaps even his students.

Fortunately, Nancy, Christine, and David have not experienced abuse similar to that of Marie. In fact, they rarely hear any derogatory comments about gays and lesbians. Nancy feels that working in a Roman Catholic school system with many nuns and brothers silences any sort of personal discussion. When asked if she heard any colleague make jokes or comments to other colleagues, this was her reply:

A little, but quite frankly less than if I was in any other working environment. The talk around our staff room table has always been really inhibited as a result of working with nuns and brothers; everyone is sort of afraid of them. I never hear dirty jokes, or racist jokes, or homophobic jokes. We talk about the Price Club, or the specials at the supermarket, or who's getting married. Our talk is so safe, you could talk about it in front of the nuns.

The lack of homophobic remarks at Nancy's school does not mean this institution is free of heterosexism. Often what is not said is more indicative of a school environment than what is said. I have certainly heard heterosexist and homophobic remarks by my colleagues. However, I have also witnessed their interest in becoming more accepting and open-

minded professionals. They want to understand sexual orientations that are different from their own; they could never learn by silence.

Nancy does not hear derogatory comments from the students on the playground either. It is her opinion that a French immersion school draws a lot of "politically correct" students. In her junior high school, the students are up to date on topics of feminism, gay rights, and world views. They were described as privileged kids who are well-travelled, and have parents with high educational levels.

While Christine recognizes that she does not teach in an ivory tower, the level of students in her classes, coupled with the fact that more and more lesbians and gays are coming out in the media, has resulted in students being less homophobic than a decade ago. She has heard a few jokes in the staff room, but feels that they are never malicious.

All jokes tend to be stupid, tend to be sexist, and [gay] jokes are just that. I can't say that I know of a colleague with a particular axe to grind, nor a particular hatred.

David, who teaches in an integrated school, has heard so few jokes that he suspects more colleagues know of his sexual orientation than he is aware. While he feels his staff is fairly liberal, he does not hear many remarks from the "red-necks" either.

A couple of [colleagues] will say things that you roll your eyes at, but as a rule, my feeling is that most educated people now find it just as politically incorrect to make gay jokes as it is to say 'nigger'. *That's probably part of the reason I don't really hear much.* And part is that they know I am or suspect I am gay, so they just won't say anything in front of me.

David, like Christine, feels that homophobic remarks from students have lessened since he first began teaching. Even though he periodically notices the word 'fag' written

on lockers or a book, he does not feel students are as judgmental as several years ago. He also reported that he never hears negative comments about the celebrities who have come out in recent years, such as Melissa Ethridge, Ellen DeGeneres, and Elton John.

## **(ii) students**

Cultural homophobia, as codes of behavior expected by society which are neither law nor policy (Blumenfeld, 1992), is present in Newfoundland schools in several ways. Gay and lesbian students are silenced by denying them space for support groups, and access to curriculum materials or library books on gay and lesbian issues. They are denied open discussion about topics of interest to them. Teachers assume both colleagues and students are heterosexual, unless told otherwise, or in situations whereby something is 'wrong' with a student. In other words, one is heterosexual unless "proven guilty".

As reported earlier, Stephen left his community to find a better life and improve his grades. He had quit physical education class and instead enrolled in a home economics course, because he was self-conscious in the showers. He feared the boys would think he was staring at them. During one of his visits home, he went to a school dance with his old classmates.

I went to a school dance and a guy pulled a knife on me; he was stoned. He was calling me a fruit and a fag; I was petrified. My friends said that I wasn't gay, so he should leave me alone. This guy said, 'No, he's a fag for sure, he acts that way - look at him - he's different.' And he spread this around the community.

While Stephen reported that there was no physical damage, he does feel there are

emotional consequences. His parents found out about the incident, but didn't question the perpetrator's motives, nor did they press charges. When he goes home now, his friends always ask Stephen if he is indeed gay. Even though Stephen and this boy share some of the same friends, Stephen refuses to be in his company.

The [incident] was brought up a lot because some of my friends were friends with him. When they go over to his house, I don't go with them because I'm afraid he'll try to pull a knife on me again. [My friends] say, 'You're not gay, so it wouldn't happen again. You have nothing to worry about'.

Unfortunately, it appears that if Stephen was perceived by his friends as being gay, the abuse would be justified in their minds.

While none of the other students experienced the threatening level of Stephen's abuse, they have all felt victimized in some way by heterosexual students or teachers. Neither Janet nor Ellen have experienced personal homophobic attacks, but they both have been witness to boys being verbally abused because of their sexual orientation. Janet reported that one boy is given a really hard time because "he's really feminine, hangs around with girls only, and wears really tight, lime-green pants". While Ellen has heard rumours of physical attacks on teens in other schools, she personally knows of no gay or lesbian who has experienced such attacks. However, the threat of violence is always present.

There was one particular incident with a group of kids at school who are all kind of tough. They always sit in the corner next to this glass wall, and they were kicking it and calling a young fellow a fag. This friend of ours got really angry and punched the [glass] back and it shattered. It would make you mad, because we were doing nothing, just eating our lunch.

When I see two heterosexuals making out in the cafeteria, I get fed up. If I did that I'd get the shit kicked out of me; I'd be totally ostracized - the freak of the month. It's quite cruel and sad.

Andrew feels that there has been no gay bashing at his school in recent years, and only a few people make comments and jokes. Even when the verbal abuse was aimed at him, Andrew did not let it bother him.

I wore my violet plastic pants to school one day. That sparked some guy who has a problem with me. He yelled stuff like 'big stupid queer', and asked if I went to any fag rallies lately. I just stared him down and laughed at him. A few times walking home from school some students would be driving by and yell 'faggo' or something.

Andrew has, however, felt threatened on occasion. He reported that he would sometimes respond to gay or lesbian comments if he "felt brave enough". Andrew depended on the support of his friends at school; usually female and all heterosexual. When they were not present, he usually just walked away.

While all students hear derogatory comments in class from other students, regrettably most teachers ignore them, or do not reprimand those making these comments. Teachers ignoring anti-gay comments is not unique to Newfoundland. As reported earlier, O'Connor (1994) argues that such student comments are ignored by many teachers. All the students I interviewed feel that this is inexcusable; while students are young and often only looking for attention, teachers are in a position of authority and should never tolerate such prejudice. Until we identify this issue as a prejudice similar to racism and sexism, homophobia will continue to permeate our schools, and students will fear coming out of the classroom closet.

## **II. The Birds and the Bees, Homosexuality and the Curriculum**

### **(a) Knowledge and Attitudes Regarding Lesbian and Gay Issues (Students)**

A main theme which emerged from the data was the knowledge and attitudes young people have regarding gay and lesbian issues. Considering the fact that society holds such strong negative views of homosexuality, I felt it was important to learn how lesbian and gay students feel about their sexuality. Since I hypothesized that little positive information was gained at school, I was also interested in finding out how and what they have learned about gay and lesbian issues.

It should be reiterated that my subjects were not typical of most gay and lesbian youths. Their political work for gay and lesbian rights resulted in their having greater access to positive information about their rights (or lack thereof), political lobbying happening in Newfoundland and the rest of Canada, past and present gays and lesbians involved in the arts, and resources available to them.

Unfortunately, only Stephen knows a gay or lesbian teacher. The rest suspect, or have heard unsubstantiated rumors that one or two teachers at their school may be homosexual. On a more positive note, however, they all feel they have gay and lesbian role models within the community. They have met these adults at a NAN (Newfoundland Amazon Network) Conference, NGALE (Newfoundland Gays and Lesbians for Equality) meetings, and LGBQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Questioning) Youth Group meetings. They all felt that role models in their school would be a positive experience, however, they do

not place blame on teachers who feel they cannot come out at school.

All the students I interviewed have felt excited that the 1990s is becoming a period when many artists, musicians, actors, and politicians are disclosing their sexual orientation. Unfortunately, not all the media hype portrays positive role models. Andrew's first memory of gay and lesbian lives was on a talk show.

I remember the first lesbians I saw on television were go-go dancers. That's the first memory I have. While it's not a bad [first memory], that's not the best first impression. *I don't think the community starts there.* You have to do a lot of researching yourself; in looking for gay stuff I found a lot of anti-gay literature.

Ellen feels she has lots of role models in the community, and while her parents are heterosexual, they too lobby for gay and lesbian rights. Consequently, she feels they are positive role models for how all people should treat gays and lesbians.

I admire many of the things one of the coordinators of our group has done. She puts up with so much crap and she's still alive and functioning. Svend Robinson is one of my role models. I've run into him a few times. And of course, there's my parents.

Ellen also recognizes that over the past year, she is suddenly becoming a role model for other gay and lesbian youths.

It's funny because to some people I am a role model, which can be both a good and bad thing because you feel so much pressure. Andrew was one of my role models when he first came out because he had done so much. I put him on this big pedestal, and just before he went to go away to university, we were both on the same level.

Janet has been the least political of the students I interviewed, and therefore feels she knows only a little about gay and lesbian issues. She reported that she knows little

about her rights, and the gay and lesbian community. Most of the information she has acquired has been from magazines such as 'Out' and 'Fad'. However, she feels clear about society's views of gays and lesbians.

We're a minority - that's all I know. Most people don't like us; or don't care about us. The church hates us all.

Stephen, also Catholic, recognizes that society's moral perception of homosexuality has been influenced by the church.

My parents have really negative views of homosexuality because they are Catholic. It seems like a lot of people disagree with it; especially Catholic males. A male [classmate] who was my friend considers it immoral; a sin. He thinks we shouldn't kiss, hold hands, share a bedroom, or anything. He thinks we should all be put on an island.

All the students I interviewed were either part of the gay and lesbian movement, or are interested in joining the movement in the near future. Janet is planning to go to the Lesbian and Gay Pride March this year, however, she indicated that Stephen is skeptical.

I'm trying to talk Stephen into going, but he's scared. I explained to him that you don't have to be gay to go. It's easy if you're not gay, but if you are, you're afraid people will know. You have to put up with the remarks.

Most youths were also aware of the political climate regarding amending the Human Rights Code to include sexual orientation as a prohibited grounds of discrimination. Ellen and Andrew have attended meetings this year with the liberal government lobbying to change the code. Andrew was especially dynamic.

We did that whole liberal caucus thing - so we met with some members of the caucus. The house had closed and they had to go campaign in their ridings. We spoke about the shit gay and lesbian and bisexual people had to face, and why it would be good to include [sexual orientation] in the



Human Rights Code. One or two people came up to me and said how they related better and understood when it came from a real live gay youth. The politicians are all getting older, and I told them it was my first time voting. They got to realize that the old guard is changing; a lot more people who are more comfortable with [homosexuality] are coming of age, and are taking the reins of power. If they are not representing us, and not doing their job, we're not going to put up with it. You guys were forced to put up with it; you started the change and now we are just continuing on with it.

Stephen felt completely isolated in his community, and could not find any gay-friendly information. Lack of resources is common in high schools (Proctor & Groze, 1994) and this impacted on Stephen's self-esteem and his views of homosexuality. Learning about gay and lesbian issues has changed the way he feels about himself and his sexual orientation.

I guess I became more comfortable with my sexuality since I came out. Before that I really felt inferior. I didn't know anything; I went to a Catholic school and there was nothing on the bookshelves. Everything written was in the AIDS context, or the sexual aspect. It made me feel I was doing something wrong with my life. I felt I was being punished. But now I feel being gay is the person I'm supposed to be.

The other students are also accepting of their sexual orientation. Janet would not be happy if she changed, and Andrew reported that he was not only comfortable with his sexual orientation; he would be devastated being heterosexual. While Ellen is usually comfortable being a lesbian, she recognizes the struggle she has been forced to endure.

*Most times I am [comfortable] with my sexual orientation, and when I'm not it's because sometimes I hate going through all the crap. But then I wouldn't be me. While there are times I have had negative feelings, living with this crap makes me a better person.*

#### **(b) ABC's and Homosexuality**

Students learn lots about homosexuality in school; but apparently little of it is positive or accurate (Marcus, 1993). At a very young age, students begin to call each other "faggot", "dyke", and "fruit". Many teachers, students, and parents think such action is innocent. Adults seem to be assuming that students do not really mean it, and that some children using these terms do not even know what they mean. Inside the classroom what is not said is more significant than what is said. Family Life classes rarely *discuss gay and lesbian families as viable options*, history classes overlook the gay and lesbian civil rights movement, and Canadian law classes ignore the discrimination against gays and lesbians (Lipkin, 1995).

#### (i) teachers

I felt it was important to find out whether these teachers felt the classroom was a *viable place to learn about gay and lesbian issues*, as most teachers reported not bringing up the topic often. Some of them felt that while gay and lesbian issues were relevant in many courses, they feared being labelled *homosexual by the students*. While Nancy feels the topic should be addressed in classes, and she herself would be willing to discuss gay and lesbian issues, she is skeptical about teachers broaching the subject unprepared.

Marie not only agrees that teachers should be qualified to teach students about homosexuality, she is also more comfortable with gays and lesbians teaching such issues.

I don't think anyone should be teaching gay and lesbian issues unless they're gay or lesbian themselves. *That would be frowned upon; that comment would irritate a lot of people, especially the people would think they are open enough and have gay and lesbian friends. However, when you're*

talking about the struggles of the gay and lesbian movement, you have to be gay or lesbian to talk about it. Teachers that are gay-friendly, or are not homophobic, could teach it, but they wouldn't do as good a job.

Interestingly, while Marie believes that curricula should include gay and lesbian issues, she also feels only gay and lesbian teachers should bring up these topics. Combatting heterosexism would be impossible if the silence continues.

Marie was questioned about her sexuality when she tried to address the topic of homosexuality in her Family Life class. She was wary about introducing the topic during her sexuality unit; fearing her students would not handle a discussion maturely. When a student asked if she was a "lizzie", Marie ignored the question. She did, however, feel it was a mistake, as one student refused to come to class unless she dropped the topic. In other schools, with other groups of students, however, the topic came up again. These other experiences were far more positive for Marie.

I was teaching grade eight English last year and we were doing a debate. I had a couple of students that wanted to argue that gays and lesbians should be permitted to enter the military. There were two who were arguing [for the affirmative side], while most others were arguing [for the negative side]. That went fairly well. In another school I taught Language 1101, a course on argumentative writing. A couple of students there argued that gays and lesbians should have the right to adopt children. You'll always find some students who will support gays and lesbians.

When Marie challenged students about their beliefs for not supporting gays and lesbians, she found that students usually refer to the Bible, and while students often cannot argue logically about such beliefs, Marie argued that the prejudice "always goes back to the church". Argumentative writing courses are constructive outlets for students debating gay

and lesbian issues, as students themselves often come to the realization that their arguments are based on prejudice rather than facts.

David, who also teaches a high school argumentative writing course, has had many students write papers on gay and lesbian issues. He feels that students today are very open-minded, and only once did a student argue against gay and lesbian rights, but this experience frightened him.

I had one guy last year who had failed two papers. I assumed he wasn't going to try to pass the course, but at the very end he decided to give it one last-ditch effort. He decided to do gay marriages, and I said you have to have a thesis; you have to pick a point of view. He decided to write on 'Gays should not be allowed to marry'. I was really prepared to give this guy the benefit of doubt; if he had even one decent point in there, I would pass him. Unfortunately, he didn't have one logical argument, so I had to give him a lousy mark. I hoped after that he wouldn't come back and say I flunked him because I'm gay myself, and not because he did a lousy job. That's the only paper I've ever had from a student who took any negative viewpoint on it.

David had another student who initially chose the thesis 'Gays should not be allowed to adopt', however, he felt delighted when the student came back and changed his thesis to the affirmative side when he found overwhelming support for gays.

While Christine has never initiated classes on the topic of homosexuality, she finds it arises in her Literature classes. Some of the poems and novels she teaches make reference to same-sex love, and she usually finds only a couple of students comment on how "gross" one man is writing to another about love. Christine feels that during these discussions, being in the closet is more effective.

One of the *luxuries* [writer's emphasis] I feel about being private, about

not being known as a gay teacher, is that when issues of homosexuality come up, I feel a lot safer. Students perceive me as promoting tolerance, which is legitimate. I think that people who wanted to attack me could say [if I was out], that I was promoting homosexuality, which clearly I am not. What I'm trying to do is educate the students about the whole world.

This statement by Christine really underlines a heterosexist attitude on her part. While she perceives promoting tolerance to be legitimate, she apparently feels being known as a lesbian would be perceived as promoting homosexuality. Further, she perceives being in the closet a 'luxury'. *Once again we are witness to gay and lesbian teachers accepting the oppression of the education system.*

Nancy feels that one of the biggest drawbacks in Newfoundland schools being denominational is in the content she is allowed to teach. She is anxiously awaiting the day that churches are no longer controlling her school.

That's the way I feel oppressed by the Catholic system. It's very difficult to teach kids about AIDS when the nuns don't want us to even talk about condoms. The school nurse and I did a whole class on AIDS, and not one student commented that it was a gay disease. I'd say the kids were too afraid to say anything with the nuns there.

It was obvious throughout these interviews that the Catholic church is perceived as a major oppressor of gays and lesbians. Marie feels that if gay and lesbian content were taught in school, homophobic and heterosexist attitudes and behaviors would change with both colleagues and students.

The problem is right now, the hold of the Catholic church over society, that has to be battled first. But if we're going to change attitudes in society, one of the most important institutions to do this is in the school system. If you taught little kids going up through primary and elementary, having books where you talk about the kid with two mommies or two daddies, gays and

lesbians would be perceived as natural as heterosexuals.

**(ii) students**

Not only did I question teachers on what they have taught about homosexuality in classes, but I also questioned the students on what they have learned regarding their sexual orientation. All reported that the topic of homosexuality had been brought up in some classes. However, not all felt the classes were a positive experience. Stephen shared this negative experience.

I remember in grade nine religion class we were doing sex education. We had a question box, and I wanted to ask something about homosexuality. I was worried the teacher would recognize my handwriting, so it took me a long time to build up the nerve to write down my question. It was never answered. Most people thought that teacher was gay, because he used to be a priest.

*One of Ellen's teachers also became suspect when she defended lesbians and gays during class discussion.*

I remember in Adolescence class in grade nine there was a class about sexuality. The teacher didn't address the topic, but the students brought it up. There was a lot of rumors going around about her sexuality, but she *violently denied them*. One of the questions was, 'Are you a lesbian, Miss?', and the teacher laughed like it was one of the most ridiculous things she had ever heard. She told us things like the anus isn't designed for a penis. I was thinking, 'Who is the architect?'. Well, at least in those classes everything was open discussion. At least she never made any reference to it being a sin.

*Andrew has concerns about non-qualified people teaching homosexual content. In a Level II Family Life course his teacher explained the Catholic church's view on homosexuality, but he was not judgmental, nor did he try to enforce it. However, Andrew felt that the*

teacher's reason for not being judgmental was one of ignorance.

He was saying it's okay to be homosexual, because it's not a choice. The grossest thing is there are people who say it was a choice for them. Is nobody listening? Why shouldn't it be a choice; why shouldn't we have the freedom of choice? Once they say it's genetic, they can find the gene and start curing people and making babies straight; which means I'm going to have to start farming homosexuals and repopulate the world with them. I'll get a lab together and start breeding little queer babies. It's interesting that all these Family Life teachers are out there making these grandiose statements about it not being a choice; nothing is proven yet, and I hope nothing ever is [proven].

Andrew's teacher supports the essentialist theory of sexual orientation, however, he is teaching this theory as a truth. If he realized this has not been proven, or if Andrew had challenged his teacher's 'knowledge', a debate centered on the scientific study of the cause(s) of homosexuality could have proven worthwhile.

Other negative experiences included the idea that when homosexuality comes up during discussion, many teachers ignore homophobic remarks. Some teachers will ignore the comments, others will make a joke out of them, but a few try to talk about the remarks. Stephen feels that while he has had some positive experiences of discussions on gays and lesbians, sometimes his teachers have not handled the topic with professionalism. One teacher talked about the men in the military in the United States as having a lot of "buddies". When students asked what he meant, the teacher explained that there was a lot of *homosexual activity in the military*. When one student commented that such activity was gross, the teacher flippantly replied, "Well, some men have lots and lots of buddies in the military". Unfortunately, the ignorance of another teacher goes unchallenged.

Ellen has also experienced a teacher's heterosexism when students brought up the topic in class.

There was a while when students were getting upset about the whole Bert and Ernie dilemma. There was a rumor going around (which is not true), that [television producers] were going to kill Bert; they were going to drown him or something, because you couldn't have two guys living together on Sesame Street. Puppets were actually taken off the shelves in some countries. One particular teacher said, 'Yeah, but a five-year-old watching doesn't know that it's wrong for two guys to live together'; nothing about the trauma for a five-year-old to see their favorite television personalities drown! You know, this is an authority figure giving this message to thirty-something students.

Further, this teacher is telling youths that it is not okay for two men to live together, a sexist message which is harmful for both gay and heterosexual young men. She is telling these boys that it is not okay for men to share close relationships with other men.

Many gay and lesbian teachers fear being labelled by discussing homosexuality, and perhaps their fears are real. Janet's class had this reaction when a gay-positive teacher was discussing gays and lesbians.

We were talking about 'CODCO', and then 'This Hour Has 22 Minutes', and then one of the kids said, 'I can't stand 'Kids in the Hall' because Scott McDonald is gay', and the teacher really got offended by that and asked her what was her problem. She said, 'Maybe I'm gay', and then other people took offense and the whole class got into it. Then everyone got a bit weary about her, maybe she shouldn't have said that. Rumors spread pretty quickly around the school about her being a lesbian.

In recent years there have been many posters, books, and pamphlets aimed at heterosexual youth regarding safer sex. Unfortunately, even though many youths still perceive AIDS as a gay disease, the education system has continued to ignore our gay



youth. Andrew, who has volunteered with the Newfoundland and Labrador AIDS Commission is very concerned with the lack of information being imparted in school.

AIDS is now spreading to our gay youth, because our generation feels it was spread in the gay community with the older generation. It's terrible that there's not a lot of sex education at schools. We had one day to talk about homosexuality; one day out of my fourteen years of school. That class included lesbianism, bisexuality, homosexuality, and AIDS - all in one forty minute period.

Andrew felt that while the discussion was far too short, the priest did not judge homosexuals. Instead, he talked about people's sexual orientation being on both ends of the spectrum.

Whether teachers are qualified or not, all the students feel that more discussion on homosexuality in the classroom would be a positive experience for both gay and lesbian youth and heterosexuals. Ellen feels that some students would "unlearn" the prejudices they have grown up with, and the next generation would be more accepting.

### **Curriculum Changes Suggested by Informants**

All the students and teachers I interviewed agree that the Newfoundland education system needs to make curriculum changes in order for this generation to fully accept gays and lesbians. Since the education system is one of the most powerful institutions in imparting values in our society, all feel that it is imperative to portray *gays and lesbians* in a positive light from the earliest grades. However, not all students and teachers agree on the manner in which the topic of homosexuality should be addressed.

**(i) teachers**

Nancy would prefer gay and lesbian content integrated into the present curriculum. Reading a novel solely about being gay or lesbian irritates her. She also argues that exclusive homosexual content separates us from the rest of society in a negative way. However, a novel with gay content as a normal and acceptable part of life appeals to her, and Nancy feels students would benefit from this type of literature.

*I want to be as accepted as Catholic minorities. Catholics celebrate their Catholicism, yet they are still a part of our culture. It's like we take ourselves out of the culture, then whine because we are not accepted. I would prefer to see students reading a novel where there's gay and straight characters, and all are part of life. Instead, gay and lesbian novels make a point of trying to make our lives acceptable. I really think integration would be much better, so it slips into your unconscious, and is almost a part of life.*

Christine also had concerns about teaching novels regarding gay and lesbian issues for the sole purpose of teaching about homosexuals. However, she does recognize that many Literature teachers in Newfoundland would probably never bring up the topic; "that sort of invisible world is never made apparent". Christine also feels that if teachers are not comfortable with the topic, it is probably better that they not teach about it. While some of the poems and stories she teaches have a gay voice, the maturity level of her students dictates whether or not the homosexual content is brought to light.

*I think texts, novels, and plays should be taught because they are good; that's my concern as an English teacher. Secondly, I think they should be read because they have something to say to the audience - to the students who are reading them. I don't agree with teaching a novel expressly for the purpose of having gay and lesbian content. I would like to see a book with gay content portraying a very human character, dealing with this issue just*

like any other kind of issue thrust at people. I teach Stephen Spender's poem, 'My Parents Kept Me From Children Who Were Rough', and to me the speaker is a middle-aged gay man looking back at his time in school. With some classes that might come up; while a class who may not be ready to embrace that, I would leave it. It would depend on their maturity, experience, or interest.

While Spender may or may not be a gay boy, he is certainly mocked by the "children who were rough," by copying his lisp, springing out behind hedges, and throwing mud at him. While Christine may feel some of her high school students would not be ready to "embrace" the fact that Spender may have been a gay lad, the poem is also taught in grade eight. The text, Crossings, which is used in the grade eight English course, has questions regarding the type of boy the "children who were rough" believe Spender to be and how stereotyping affects the way we see people. I feel that leaving out the fact that Spender may be stereotyped as a present day gay boy takes away from the message of the poem. Further, while a lesson may go more smoothly for the teacher by leaving out that which is perceived as controversial by immature students, perhaps these are the very students who need the most discussion on topics such as homosexuality.

Marie had lots of ideas on integrating gay and lesbian content into the English curriculum. She argues that while students study many novels which are by famous homosexual and bisexual authors such as Virginia Woolf, (To the Lighthouse, Orlando, Mrs. Dalloway); T.E. Lawrence, (The Seven Pillars of Wisdom, Odyssey); and Tennessee Williams, (The Glass Menagerie, Gone With the Wind, A Streetcar Named Desire) rarely are the orientations of these authors discussed.

In English classes we introduce an author by talking about their families, their marriages, and the settings in which they lived. However, we rarely mention that they were gay or lesbian. To not talk about their sexuality is to leave out a very important part of their lives. Research into things like if there were labels such as homosexual, or if it was just a behavior - the social environment at that time in history - would enrich our understanding of their writings so much more.

Marie was also had ideas about what should be taught in family life courses regarding same-sex families.

I'd like to see that in the curriculum gay and lesbian families are included; that some kids grow up in gay and lesbian families. Studies have shown that there's no difference in the way these kids turn out. A lot of people believe that if you grow up in a gay or lesbian family, the kids will grow up to be gay too. Not that it's a big deal, however, it's just not the case.

While Nancy, who teaches in a Roman Catholic school was adamant that she didn't know anything about the religious education courses, David and Marie, both from the integrated system, feel that religion courses in the Newfoundland education system convey messages of discrimination to lesbians and gays. Marie claims that we would have to "battle the churches" to make religious education more gay and lesbian friendly. She has studied the Bible in some depth, and argues that nonacceptance of gays and lesbians by most christian religions is erroneous.

The impact of religion on gay and lesbian lives should be discussed. Religious education courses should teach students that homosexuality is okay. Jesus Christ never condemned gays or lesbians. God did not include homosexuality in the Ten Commandments. This is not something God forgot to include. God is not absent-minded! We are a part of the world, and God felt that our role was to teach tolerance within the races. In Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, gays and lesbians were not condemned. I think we should teach students how to critically analyze the old testament, along with parts of the new testament. Women were the property of their

husbands, people were stoned to death, and men had their eyes gouged out for looking at a woman lustfully. Nobody follows those beliefs anymore, but we can't seem to get rid of the misunderstandings of 'Man shall not lie next to man'.

Many fundamentalist Christians argue gays and lesbians are destroying the traditional family; and are even anti-family (Miller, 1989). Some parents fear we are trying to promote homosexuality to their children. Teachers wonder how much more information we can fit into an already packed curriculum. I think if people listened to Marie's theory of the relevance of discussing homosexuality in the classroom, many would change their opinions.

Including gay and lesbian issues in the curriculum teaches tolerance. If you look around the world at the countries fighting, and you listen to both sides, you realize that the reason these countries are fighting is because of intolerance. If you have a society where one group cannot tolerate the other group, then there's no way out except violence. If we want to work toward a world of peace, tolerance is a must. I think one of the most valuable things we can instill in our youth is how to tolerate differences among us.

#### **(ii) students**

All of the students would like to see the topic of homosexuality addressed more often, and with more professionalism. However, one student has concerns about formally *integrating the topic into the curriculum*. While Stephen would like to see the topic of homosexuality addressed in courses, he would prefer to see it integrated slowly. If gay and lesbian content suddenly appeared in the curriculum 'overnight', Stephen would have several concerns. He feels the negative response from some students who are not mature

enough may be severe.

If you make homosexuality a reality, more can be said about it. It's sad to say, but sometimes ignorance is bliss.

Stephen also fears there are too many homophobic teachers in our education system, and many would do more harm than good. He indicated that like the backlash in Alberta and British Columbia, (Dwyer, 19997) if too much attention is given here to integrating gay and lesbian issues in the curriculum, parents might cause a lot of disruption. Some parents might not allow the teaching of such information, and the few already gay-friendly teachers might be silenced.

Even though Stephen may fear a backlash against gay and lesbian content, he certainly has many ideas on how to better integrate knowledge about our lives into the curriculum, as did the other participants in this research. Stephen, Janet, and Andrew have read Reflections of a Rock Lobster by Aaron Fricke, an autobiography about a gay teen who made national news by taking a male date to his prom. The students feel this story would promote tolerance.

Ellen believes a novel like Annie on My Mind, by Nancy Garden should be required reading in high school. This is a touching story of two young girls in love, whose escapades cause two lesbian teachers at school to be outed and consequently fired. Ellen argues that there are enough short stories, poems, and novels about heterosexuality, to which not all students can relate. There are subthemes of friendship and class which makes this novel appropriate for students of any sexual orientation. Andrew feels

discussion about why Annie on My Mind is not a literary classic would be a valuable lesson.

[Annie on My Mind] isn't a literary classic because it's gay centered. It's like the whole debate over affirmative action. There's damn good books out there by queer people; there are lots of qualified gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. It's just that there's homophobic people who think we shouldn't have a voice, and don't want us to have equality. To not have gay and lesbian literature, and just integrate everyone in together is like saying women's studies and black studies are not important in and of themselves. We are still struggling, and the struggles should be written about. Maybe in fifty years it won't be necessary to have separate studies, but until we are equal, [gay and lesbian studies] are important.

There was no shortage of ideas from the students for integrating gay and lesbian issues into the social studies curriculum. Andrew compares the present gay and lesbian movement to the black movement of the 1960s. He argues that discussion of a present civil rights movement, including its issues, struggles, and backlashes would benefit all students.

If you teach [gay and lesbian issues] as a human rights issue, instead of as an AIDS issue, or as a sexual behavior issue, not only would students accept us, they would grow in acceptance and understanding of other diversities.

Almost all the students I interviewed felt that inclusion of the gay and lesbian persecutions during World War II would enhance the Level II history course. Many gays and lesbians are aware of the fact that just as six million people were forced to wear an armband of the star of David to be identified as Jewish, thousands of men were forced to wear a pink triangle armbands to be identified as gay and women were forced to wear black armbands to be identified as lesbian. Many of those identified as homosexual were used in science

experiments. The pink triangle now is worn as pins, printed on shirts, and made into jewellery to acknowledge those people who were tortured during the war, and has evolved into a symbol of gay and lesbian pride. Unfortunately, many social studies teachers are not aware of it, and do not include this in discussions of Nazi control. Stephen imparted this information to his class and teacher.

Someone brought up in World War II about how Jewish people had to wear the star of David. I told the teacher about the pink triangle, and he asked me *what that meant*. I explained that it was to acknowledge gays who were murdered during the war. I thought it would be interesting to include that, and it was the first time I felt these students empathized.

Another popular milestone for gays and lesbians is the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York's Greenwich Village (Duberman, 1994). For the first time, lesbians and gays resisted arrest during one of their routine raids on the gay bar 'Stonewall', which resulted in a series of riots. Today, Stonewall is recognized as the birth of the gay and lesbian political movement. Stephen feels that this information is pertinent in any discussion of civil rights' movements. Andrea argued that gay and lesbian rights should be included in Canadian Law courses, as our struggles are ongoing. Stephen stated that sodomy laws, how they infringe on both the lives of homosexuals and heterosexuals, and how these laws have changed over time, could be brought into the social studies or religious education curriculum.

While some of the teachers struggled with how gay and lesbian issues could be included in the science curriculum, Stephen felt the essentialist and social constructionist debate would be worthwhile.



In biology when you talk about genetics it would be nice to talk about if you are born gay or straight. Just because nothing is proven yet doesn't mean that you don't study these questions.

Nearly all participants talked about the fact that in their art class there is no mention of the sexual orientation of artists such as Michelangelo, even though much of his work contains homoerotic content. Ellen feels that teachers "always leave their sexualities a big mystery, as if something was written on the board and erased, leaving only chalk prints behind". Andrew argued that while most of the artists discussed in class were gay, lesbian, or bisexual, this fact is omitted.

It would be nice if a teacher were to say, "By the way, 90% of the artists we just talked about are lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Teachers should talk about the climate of the society [artists] were living in at the time, and their sexual orientation, and how both affected their art.

Andrew even had ideas for mathematics class, beginning during the primary grades. He feels that portraying same-sex partners in word problems, instead of only the traditional "Ricky and Jane", or "Bobby and Sue", would enable young children to realize that gays and lesbians are present in our society. He even made up one word problem himself. "What is two queers plus three queers? Four queers, because one was gay-bashed." Andrew's 'joke' is indicative of the fear he has felt at school, and the subsequent bitterness toward homophobic acts.

Not surprisingly, family studies was the most common curriculum area reported by students as lacking gay and lesbian issues. While many teachers may mention gay and lesbian families once or twice during a course, other teachers omit such families

altogether. The participants feel that this is the most basic and imperative way lesbians and gays should be included in the curriculum. Janet argued that a whole section of the course should be devoted to same-sex families; to eliminate the myths surrounding gay and lesbian families, and arguments for and against same-sex marriages should be explored.

Stephen and Andrew are concerned about the lack of information being imparted to gay and lesbian students *regarding STDs, AIDS, and safer sex*. They only hope in their view that while the curriculum devotes almost all of its information regarding safer sex for heterosexuals, individual family studies' teachers are covering this topic from a wider perspective.

The abundance of suggestions on integrating lesbian and gay content into the present curriculum shows that while these students are very knowledgeable, they had to seek this information outside of school. As most of the students I interviewed were very out, other gay and lesbian teens may not be so lucky.

## **Summary, Implications and Suggestions for Further Research**

### **Summary of Main Findings**

I was interested in examining homophobia and heterosexism in the Newfoundland education system. Three main themes emerge from the data: experiences of homophobia and heterosexism in schools, what students have formally learned and teachers have taught about gay and lesbian issues, and changes to the education system which would make school more gay and lesbian friendly.

Coming out of the classroom closet and homophobia and heterosexism in school were the themes which emerged from the investigation of the question "What experiences have gay and lesbian students and teachers encountered in the education system?" To partake in this study, it is obvious that everyone had to be out to some degree. I met all the students I interviewed at our Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Questioning (LGBQ) Youth Group. Further, they are all out to their families, friends, and some peers at school. Only one participant was out to his whole school. While all the youths shared stories of pain and rejection because of their sexual orientation, not one was sorry for having come out. Most feel that coming out has been a positive experience, in that now they have the courage to be politically active in lobbying for improvements for gays and lesbians. The main reason students do not come out to the whole school is fear of being physically or verbally assaulted; for them it is a safety issue. Most students stated they were comfortable with their sexual orientation, would not want to change, and that being a

minority has caused them to become stronger individuals. Further, they recognize that society and its powerful institutions have a problem with homosexuality; being gay or lesbian is not inherently wrong.

Teachers, on the other hand, are out to a select few. The suitability clause in the teachers' contract is protected by Section 17 of the Terms of Union, and serves as a constant reminder that gay and lesbian teachers could be fired in this province for living in contradiction to religious beliefs. It is because they fear being fired that teachers are therefore apprehensive about coming out to colleagues and students. They are also concerned about losing credibility and being ostracized by colleagues. While some teachers feel coming out to students would, in spite of the threat of job loss, be a positive experience for both their students and themselves, others feel their personal lives are not a relevant issue during class discussion.

The biggest difference between students and teachers was reported previously, and is worth repeating. Interestingly, many out gay and lesbian students face isolation because of their honesty about their lives, while teachers face isolation because of their secrecy about their lives. If the opposite was the case, (teachers were out and students were in the closet) I feel both groups would still face isolation. Students would feel alone with their secret, while some teachers would be made to feel different than their heterosexual colleagues. I know from personal experience being the only out teacher on staff that sometimes I am treated differently than other female teachers. Unfortunately, being lesbian or gay, (or perhaps any minority) we are made to feel different and isolated at

times. Such is the function of homophobia or any form of prejudice.

A second theme which emerged was the experiences of lesbian and gay students and teachers regarding homophobia and heterosexism in their schools. Generally, while reported overt violence against gay and lesbian students was less than I suspected, the threat of violence was always present. Only one student (Stephen) reported experiencing a physical attack due to his sexual orientation, however, all the other students have heard stories, or rumors about peers being beaten up with zero support of the victim from society. Whether these stories are real, half-truths, or false, they powerfully reinforce gays' and lesbians' beliefs that their sexual orientation is not as legitimate as that of heterosexuals. Such stories also serve as a constant reminder that to be out as a gay or lesbian youth is dangerous.

Only one teacher, Marie, has experienced overt homophobia; in this case from a male colleague. However, it is interesting to note that she is the only teacher who voiced an opinion when negative remarks about gays or lesbians were discussed, and she is the most out of all the teachers I interviewed. One would wonder what situations would arise if the other participants were to lobby for gays and lesbians in their staff rooms as she does.

Two themes emerged regarding the curriculum: that students do possess knowledge regarding gay and lesbian issues, and that students have learned and teachers have taught little information about homosexuality in their courses. Without a doubt, the prescribed curriculum in Newfoundland denies the existence of gays and lesbians in our society. All students experienced some discussion on gay and lesbian issues, however, it

was very infrequent and often gays and lesbians were portrayed negatively. Many feel that the denominational education system in Newfoundland has been the most powerful institution to silence such topics being addressed.

Some students are very concerned that while AIDS among gay youth is increasing, the curriculum addresses HIV and AIDS within the heterosexual context alone. Most teachers did not broach the topic of homosexuality themselves, but found issues of gays and lesbians came up in family life, social studies, literature, and language courses.

Also there was a need to address gay and lesbian issues in the curriculum. Both students and teachers felt that such inclusion would help alleviate homophobia and heterosexism, not only in our education system, but would also prepare students to be more tolerant after high school. Students and teachers demonstrated ways in which gays and lesbians could be integrated into the curricula of literature, social studies, science, art, mathematics, family studies, and religious education.

### **Theoretical Implications**

Several theoretical perspectives were discussed in the literature review: the 'essentialist', 'social constructionist', and 'postmodern' theories of sexuality, homophobia, and heterosexism. I have concluded that the social constructionist and post modern theories support the arguments and findings of my thesis. As discussed previously, supporters of social constructionism view categories such as gender and sexuality as being transmitted through symbolic interaction, rather than being individually invented. Social

constructivists view sexual orientation categories as assigned by western society. Men and women are labelled heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual. Such labels serve to separate people which perpetuates homophobia and heterosexism.

Homophobia is a consequence of the institution of heterosexism. The participants in my study reported their schools to be heterosexist. Our education system establishes heterosexual orientation as the only legitimate sexual orientation. Lesbian and gay relationships, identity, and community were found to be silenced in the curriculum. Homophobic behavior such as anti-gay comments and jokes tolerated by the powerful are common occurrences for our students. Students and teachers deny their identities to peers and colleagues in fear of physical harassment or losing their credibility or jobs. They have been told, and some believe, that heterosexuality is better and more legitimate than their sexualities.

Postmodernists such as Foucault and Vance argue that categories such as sexual orientation are products of history. One historical cause of oppression experienced by gays and lesbians is the hostility of many Christian churches. The present education system in Newfoundland was founded on the principles of various Christian religions. The modern day interpretation of the Bible by these churches continues to view homosexuality as a sin, thereby oppressing the gay and lesbian teachers and students in our schools.

### **Practical Implications**

Further to recommendations to include gay and lesbian issues in the curriculum,

the participants provided several suggestions for improving the lives of lesbian and gay teachers and students. While students' recommendations largely centered around physical safety issues, teachers' recommendations portrayed concern over the protection of their jobs.

Students expressed a desire to attend a school that is more gay and lesbian friendly. They suggested several ways this could be accomplished. Some proposed gay, lesbian, and bisexual support groups in their schools, coordinated by youths and adults in the lesbian and gay communities. Others felt that support groups would not draw enough youths, as students in the closet would be afraid of other students knowing they attended. One student suggested the group could be a gay, lesbian, and bisexual friendly group, whereby people would not disclose their sexual orientation, however, work toward making their schools less homophobic.

All students were concerned over the ignorance of many students and teachers regarding heterosexism and homophobia. They advised that students, teachers, and guidance counsellors need anti-homophobia workshops to alleviate the threat of violence gays and lesbians constantly feel by the lack of support from those around them. They argued that more teachers would reprimand anti-gay comments in their classrooms if such workshops were conducted. Further, all suggested a policy on violence against gays and lesbians in schools, similar to sexual harassment policies currently in place in some areas.

Students presented several ideas to enhance the visibility of gays and lesbians at school. Posters for LGBQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Questioning) Youth Group and the



annual Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Pride March are presently not allowed to be displayed in some schools. Further, no gay friendly pamphlets or posters are displayed in the offices of guidance counsellors. Such valuable resources would demonstrate to gay and lesbian youth that they are not alone, and that there are places they can seek support. It would also make students aware that some guidance counsellors are approachable in dealing with issues of sexuality. All student participants expressed a desire for school libraries to carry books and videos on gay and lesbian issues.

Similar to the findings of Sears (1991), gay and lesbian students felt that guidance counsellors are unprepared, uncomfortable, and unprofessional when dealing with issues of homosexuality. They felt that in order to make guidance counsellors more aware, a mandatory course should be provided during their training at university.

Finally, students expressed a hope that gay and lesbian teachers would come out of the closet. While students recognize that teachers fear losing their jobs, they also expressed concern over the alarming suicide rate among gay and lesbian teens, which they attribute to lack of support, resources, and role models.

Gay and lesbian teachers too think about the suicide rate among gay and lesbian youth, and some expressed guilt that they could not be role models by coming out of the closet. However, none are willing to do so until changes are made in the education system in the area of protection from being fired from our jobs due to our sexual orientation. They fear, however, that this will not happen without either the suitability clause of the teachers' contract being abolished, or the religious institutions in Newfoundland becoming

more accepting of gays and lesbians.

Most teachers felt that the issue of safety for gay and lesbian students should not be left up to individual teachers. While one teacher argued that the onus was on school administration to decide the policies of anti-gay violence, another stated responsibility should be at the school board level. Her ideas were similar to those of many of the students; to initiate a policy regarding any kind of violence, with a clause including violence against persons for race, gender, *ability and sexual orientation*.

Another teacher felt that the Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association (NLTA) should acknowledge, through their bulletins and workshops, the presence of gays and lesbians in school. *While visibility is viewed as important, she also expressed concern that the present trend of inviting a gay or lesbian adult to come into a class to speak about the lives of gays and lesbians does not benefit students. She claims that one speaker does not represent the lives of all gays and lesbians.*

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

The interviews for this research were conducted during the winter and spring of 1997, a significant time in Newfoundland when education reform was very much undecided. Newfoundland gays and lesbians were hoping that soon the provincial Human Rights Code would be amended to include sexual orientation as a prohibited grounds of discrimination, and consequently protect employees from being fired on the sole basis of sexual orientation. Most of the participants in this study feel that education reform will

protect gay and lesbian teachers, in that the suitability clause of the Newfoundland Teachers' Contract will be abolished, thereby enabling protection under the Human Rights Code. Since this recently happened, a study paralleling this one, where results are compared with those presented here, would be most valuable.

The power of the institution of the church over the lives of gays and lesbians in Newfoundland cannot be overstated. While most of the participants in this study do not attend church regularly, and others dismissed the church altogether, gay and lesbian teachers and students are affected not only by the institution of the education system, but also the institution of the church. For this reason, I recommend study into how the private lives of lesbian and gay teachers were affected by the churches' domination over the schools, compared to the affects following the constitutional amendment.

The omission of bisexual teachers and students was a conscious decision. At the onset of my research, I thought I would include the stories of bisexual teachers and students. However, I could find no bisexual teachers. While there were plenty of bisexual youths to interview, over the course of this research I realized they deserve a study to themselves. It was brought to my attention by some of the gay youths that many young people are coming out as bisexual. It became obvious that some gay and lesbian and straight teachers and youths have difficulty accepting bisexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation. Some of my participants felt bisexual youths were questioning their sexuality and would later emerge as either heterosexual or homosexual. Other participants expressed the opinion that perhaps these bisexuals were 'on the fence' where it was safe; to

be heterosexual is not in vogue, and to be exclusively gay or lesbian is too final - too dangerous. Such opinions surely cause bisexuals to feel oppressed by both their heterosexual and homosexual peers. I therefore concluded that they warrant separate study, as their issues may differ drastically from the groups which I studied.

Analyzing the use of language by both students and teachers from my data would serve as worthwhile research. Gays and lesbians are constantly looking for 'empathy', 'understanding', 'acceptance', 'inclusion', and 'tolerance'. What do these terms really mean to the participants of this study, and to the gay and lesbian communities at large? Further, how can these concepts be realized in a practical way in the classroom?

As stated previously, the participants in this study were a unique group. Further research in this topic should include a larger sample. Another area of study would be to investigate the parallel experiences of gay and lesbian teachers and students in a rural setting. Also, the experiences of gays and lesbians may be radically different in a single-sex school, which would warrant separate study.

*The most important practical area for future study* would be to develop a handbook for teachers on how to include gay and lesbian issues in the present and upcoming curricula. While everyone agreed that these issues need to be discussed, they also indicated that even many gay and lesbian friendly teachers have neither the information nor the sensitivity to deal with the topic of homosexuality properly. Such a handbook was unfortunately beyond the scope of this thesis, and would perhaps be best developed within a Master of Education degree, perhaps compelling the attention of at

least one major education institution, the Faculty of Education, which is responsible for the training of teachers in Newfoundland and Labrador.

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## Appendix A

### **Areas Covered in Students' Interviews**

#### **What experiences did you encounter in the Newfoundland Education system because you are a lesbian or gay student?**

1. How old are you?
2. What is your gender?
3. What kind of school do you attend?
4. How many students are in your school?
5. Did you choose this school? Why?
6. Describe the kind of student you are.
7. Are you involved in any extra-curricular activities? If not, why not?
8. Have you ever experienced 'gay bashing' at school?
9. Have you ever been verbally abused?
10. Have you ever heard homophobic remarks or jokes not directed at you specifically in your school?
11. Have you ever come out to friends?
12. Are you out to peers at school?
13. Have you come out to any member on staff at your school?
14. Do you know any other gays or lesbians in your school?
15. Has any gay or lesbian teacher come out to you?
16. Do you know any other adults who are lesbian or gay?
17. Do you think any teacher on staff is lesbian or gay?

**What have you learned about homosexuality in courses?**

1. What is your attitude about homosexuality - i.e. comfortable, would like to change, etc.?

2. What do you know about homosexuality?

3. Where did you learn these things?

4. Has any teacher ever had classes on the topic of homosexuality?

5. Has any student ever brought up the topic of homosexuality in class?

**What curriculum and other changes would help decrease the homophobia and/or heterosexism in our school system?**

1. Would you like to see the topic of homosexuality addressed in courses? Why or why not?

2. How do you think your experiences and feelings at school would be different if this topic was addressed?

3. How do you think other students would react to addressing homosexuality in courses?

4. Do you think the behaviors and attitudes of other students would be different if homosexuality was part of the curriculum?

5. What additions or information could be included in the following courses to make a more gay and lesbian-positive curriculum?

- a. English
- b. History
- c. Art
- d. Science
- e. Health
- f. Family Studies
- g. Drama

6. What other changes in the education system would improve the experiences of lesbian

and gay youth?

## Appendix B

### **Areas Covered in Teachers' Interviews**

#### **What experiences did you encounter in the education system because you are a lesbian or gay teacher?**

1. Are you presently teaching in the Newfoundland education system?  
If you are no longer a teacher, why?
2. Under which board do you work?
3. What grade do you teach?
4. What courses do you teach?
5. For how many years have you taught:
  - a. all together?
  - b. in your present school?
6. How many teachers are on your staff?
7. Are you 'out' to staff members?
8. Have you ever come out to any of your students?
9. Do you ever fear losing your job because you are lesbian or gay?
10. Has any student ever come out to you?
11. Do you think it is important to come out to students? Why or why not?
12. Would you like to come out to your students? Why or why not?
13. Would you like to be out to other colleagues and administration? Why or why not?
14. Have you ever witnessed a colleague make comments or jokes about lesbians or gays to other colleagues?
15. Have you ever witnessed a colleague make comments or jokes about lesbians or gays to students?

16. How often do you hear comments or jokes about gays and lesbians made by students?
17. Do you feel oppressed as a lesbian or gay teacher? How?

**What have you taught about homosexuality in courses?**

1. Did you ever initiate classes on the topic of homosexuality? Why or why not?
2. Has any student ever brought up the topic of homosexuality in class?

**What curriculum changes would help decrease the homophobia and/or heterosexism in our school system?**

1. Would you like to see the topic of homosexuality addressed in courses? Why or why not?
2. Would you be willing to teach gay and lesbian content in your courses?
3. Do you think your colleagues would be willing to address homosexuality in courses? Why or why not?

4. Do you think the behaviors and attitudes of colleagues would be different if homosexuality was part of the curriculum?

5. Do you think the behaviors and attitudes of students would be different if homosexuality was part of the curriculum?

6. What additions or information could be included in the following courses to make a more gay and lesbian-positive curriculum?

- a. English
- b. History
- c. Art
- d. Science
- e. Health
- f. Family Studies
- g. Drama

7. What other changes in the education system would improve the experiences of lesbian and gay students?

## Appendix C

### **Consent Form for Individual Interviews with Youths and Teachers and Oath of Confidentiality**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, give Ann Shortall permission to record my interview(s). I understand that all personal information will be confidential and will be used for the purpose of research of gay and lesbian content in the curriculum, and experiences of homophobia in the school, and not in the private, sexual lives of youths and teachers. I understand that the transcription of my interview and the tapes will be confidential. During the study, tapes and transcripts will be kept in Ann Shortall's office at home. I realize that I am free to withdraw from the interview(s) and the research project at any point in the study.

Researcher \_\_\_\_\_  
Date \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher \_\_\_\_\_  
Date \_\_\_\_\_









