Speaking the unspeakable in forbidden places: addressing lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender equality in the primary school

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Abstract

This paper interrogates the ways in which school is produced as a particular bounded place (or collection of places) where sexuality, and particularly non-heterosexuality, is carefully policed by these boundaries. Drawing upon data generated in primary schools during a nationwide action research project (*No Outsiders*), we focus on three very different school places: the classroom, the staff room and a school-based after-school art club. Our analysis engages with the contingency of place-making to show that place is neither a unitary experience nor a neutral stage upon which social relations are enacted. The three vignettes analysed offer insights into the critical potential of consciously and persistently working across (apparently) boundaried spaces within and beyond schools.

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Introduction: The production of school as a heterosexual place

The primary school is often thought of as a place of safety and innocence (Kehily & Montgomery, 2004; Renold, 2005; DePalma & Atkinson, 2006a); a place where childhood is both nurtured and sheltered, and attempts to address what are seen as 'adult' issues are sometimes seen as intrusions into or threats to this safety zone. In this context, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) identities are made absent in one sense through the fact that they are not addressed in formal school contexts, while being made doubly present by the fact that they are taboo, and are brought into being through the popular discourses of homophobia.

This paper draws upon data generated in primary schools to interrogate the ways in which school is produced as a particular bounded place (or collection of places) where sexuality, and particularly non-heterosexuality, is carefully policed by these boundaries. Since September 2006, the *No Outsiders*[1] research team (consisting of fifteen teacher-researchers, nine university researchers and a diversity trainer) has been exploring ways of addressing LGBT equality in the context of English primary schools. Each teacher-researcher is generating strategies in their own practice context, with the support of university-based research assistants, and as strategies and issues emerge, they are shared with the wider research team.

Massey writes of the spatial in terms of complex geometries of power; 'Since social relations are inevitably and everywhere imbued with power and meaning and symbolism, this view of the spatial is as an ever-shifting social geometry of power and signification' (1994, p. 3). Drawing upon students' own metaphors, Gordon and

Lahelma (1996) compare school to an ant's nest, with spatial relationships and movements carefully channelled, compartmentalised and specialised. Yet as McGregor has noted, schools are not static self-contained entities but institutions continually being produced by interconnecting relationships and practices which extend in space and time (2003, p. 253). Drawing upon fieldnotes and journal entries recorded by teacher researchers and research assistants, we investigate the ways in which this power-laden social geometry of school has been meaningful within our project by focusing on three very different school places: the classroom, the staff room and a school-based after-school art club. Our analysis engages with the contingency of place-making to show that place is neither a unitary experience nor a neutral stage upon which social relations are enacted.

The classroom: Dissident bodies in (hetero)normative landscapes

This vignette explores the intermeshing of the space of the classroom and the place of the body in a provisional reading of an alternative fairy tale performed during a primary school literacy-hour project. The narrative focuses on how the body of a lesbian Cinderella challenges the (hetero)normative landscapes of pedagogic spaces. It is with the politics of the sexualized teacher body, framed within the wider 'power-geometries' (Massey, 2005) of the British education system, that this tale begins.

Producing lesbian space

The only thing that me and Cindy had in common is that we are lesbians and I guess neither of us would really want to dress like Cinderella but I would never wear what Cindy wore so I created a character fairly different from

myself. (Laura, *No Outsiders* teacher-researcher)

In her initial year as a class teacher who is not 'out' to the eight- and nine-year-olds she teaches, Laura faced a range of issues. For example, within the space of the government-imposed daily literacy hour she was motivated to explore the themes raised in the gay-affirmative story books loaned to participating schools. Laura's determination challenged her deputy head and parallel teacher, whom she eventually 'managed to persuade', and her teaching assistant, a Jehovah's Witness, who regularly removed the age-appropriate project books from display by putting them in a cupboard. Having passed the gatekeepers, Laura recorded in her research journal, from which the following quotations are taken, her resolution to 'plan a unit which looks at ways that the themes in fairy tales can be changed and adapted.'

The scheme of work during the ensuing fortnight began with the well-known alternative tale of *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch, 1982) who not only defied convention by refusing to dress as pronounced fitting by a prince but also confounded the heteronormative denouement of other tales by rejecting the prince himself. Although she described her class as 'loving' this overturning of the masculine privilege of self-determination, Laura recorded that the pupils were 'finding it hard to understand why princesses might not want to wear beautiful dresses etc!' In the next activity, Laura directed pupils to write as the Paper Bag Princess to Cinderella 'giving her advice!' This was followed by work on the more recently published *King and King* (De Haan & Nijland, 2000) along with the mention of homosexuality. Laura wrote:

I talked quite openly with my class about the Princes' sexuality – we began the lesson with a letter from the Prince asking the class for help (because he has to meet all these princesses but doesn't want to marry any of them) and then we read the book.

Despite this discussion, the embeddedness of heterosexuality and ideas about marriage were such that Laura's pupils suggested reasons for the prince not marrying a princess which cohered around his preference for singleton status and avoidance of gold-diggers. *King and King* was also used as the stimulus for pupils to write lonely hearts advertisements seeking a partner for the gay prince. Other than two pupils, the class accepted the protagonist's sexuality and wrote of his wishing 'to meet a handsome Prince to go on adventures with, play chess with, etc.' At the end of the book when the prince married another prince, Laura observed that most pupils 'did not react negatively to the outcome,' although mention of lesbians evoked laughter and cries of 'yuk'.

During the next literacy hour, Laura briefly left the classroom and returned as Cindy. Aware of the limitations of restrictive forms of lesbian identity and body habitus, she observed:

I found it difficult to decide what kind of Cinderella I would be. I didn't want to be completely feminine because they see loads of very feminine fairy tale characters all the time and yet they also seem to think that all lesbians look like men so I wanted to challenge that in them too. So I decided to be definitely female but not pink and pretty. I wore boots and a sparkly wig and a skirt and a leather jacket.

Resisting the Cartesian mind/body dualism associated with traditional storytelling, Laura performed an alternative Cinderella story which was 'a lot of fun up to the point at which I was telling them about this girl I met at the party' whereupon 'it was very scary'. Recalling that 'we've talked in class about gay men – far more than lesbians (how does that always happen?!)' Laura felt on 'pretty new ground.' After the performance, Laura's class hotseated Cindy.

One boy asked, incredulously, 'So, are you really gay?' and for a moment my heart stopped (this was getting somewhat too close for comfort but I had set this whole thing up and had to go with it) – so I answered 'Well, this is my girlfriend so yes, I'm gay' and pointed to the picture I had of this girl on the interactive whiteboard. That felt horrible but I couldn't avoid it, seeing as I was perfectly happy about answering all the other questions and I was doing this for the very reason I was aware that we hadn't spoken much about lesbians…so I wanted to present a positive lesbian to them who was comfortable about being a lesbian.

Again resisting same-sex relationships, and perhaps other aspects of Cindy's lifestyle, the pupils asked 'Will you get married?' and 'When will you get married?' Laura felt that the pupils thought 'the story hadn't been finally completed until there was marriage!'

Despite the production of lesbian space, Laura felt that she had 'no idea' what she would do if asked directly about her sexuality. But, she argued, 'even though I

can't do it yet, I feel children need to know that there are lesbians teaching them, existing in classrooms with them everyday.' Laura concluded by writing:

> Yes, Cindy did come and share a classroom with them for a little while and they interacted with her and she obviously challenged some of them who assumed she was straight but then she went away. The episode, perhaps, hinted at a different way to perform gender and sexuality and presented the children with an alternative they'd not considered and I think this, combined with other things we have done, is all contributing to them developing different understandings but, in itself, it's not enough.

This vignette portrays the body itself as the site of meaning-making, as 'the irreducible locus for the determination of all values, meanings, and significations' (Harvey, 2000, p. 97). This particular body, 'caught up in a system of constraints and privations, obligations and prohibitions' (Foucault, 1977, p. 11), serves to illustrate what kinds of bodies are prohibited from the primary classroom. It has been argued that the 'desexualization of teachers as teachers' is attributable to 'the desexualization of schooling required (however problematically) by government and dominant sexual culture' (original emphasis, Epstein & Johnson, 1998, p. 122). Simultaneously, however, desexualization assumes default heterosexuality and while heteronormative teaching bodies are openly displayed in the domain of the school, lesbian bodies tend to be invisiblised. In this example, one *No Outsiders* teacher-researcher challenged taken-for-granted heterosexuality and produced a lesbian space (Valentine 1996) in the classroom by using 'representation, gesture and play' (Creed, 1995, p. 102) in the creation of an alternative Cinderella.

Laura's analysis of her lesbian Cinderella's performance echoes Davies' view that 'it is not enough' merely to expose pupils to stories without guidance in deconstructive skills (Davies, 1993, p. 138). From a similar position, it has been posited that as teachers we should not 'abdicate our pedagogic authority' (McDowell, 1994, p. 247) by neglecting to assist children in understanding that certain authorial voices are more worthwhile than others. Rather, as 'directors of conversation' (McDowell, 1994, p. 242) it can be argued that teachers should take responsibility for helping pupils to recognize sexuality and thereby work towards greater social justice. More recently, an argument in support of 'directive' teaching approaches has been pursued to affirm the moral legitimacy of homosexuality (Hand, 2007, p. 69). The emancipatory potential of adopting directorial strategies, combined with greater awareness of the power-geometries of place and space, can be deployed by pedagogues to help children 'read against the grain' (Davies, 1993, p. 138) of the moral traditionalism typical of the fairy tale genre and involve them in the 'making,' 're-making' and if necessary 're-making again' of space (Harvey, 2000) and place in all their myriad forms.

The staffroom: Border patrol

If, as McGregor (2004) suggests, very little research has focused on the spatiality of education and the ways in which social relations constitute and are constituted in these spaces, then it would appear that even less research has focused on the constitution of staffroom space. Notable exceptions, however, have focused on the ways in which power arrangements (especially gender relations) are constituted

and spatialised in the place of the staffroom (Shilling, 1991; McGregor, 2003; McGregor, 2004; Paechter, 2004). This section of the paper will specifically explore the ways in which sexuality and sexual identities were performed in the staffroom and the way in which many teachers felt restricted to talking about sexualities equalities in these spaces – often viewing them as fixed and bounded places and as the only safe, private and respectable (adult) place for this work to be addressed.

All schools participating in the *No Outsiders* project received a set of books and resources which affirmed LGBT identities and/or troubled gender stereotypes. As the project books and resources packs were delivered to the schools they were often unpacked on staffroom tables and left for teachers to browse at their leisure. The staffroom functioned as a sort of border patrol through which these items passed on their way to the rest of the school, and sometimes this border passage was denied. For some schools this has been a strategy demanded of teachers by governing bodies, where, until further staff training has been carried out, the books and any conversations relating to the project were expected to remain. For other schools this has been a decision that has been made by senior management teams; some suggesting that the project needs to stay within the space of the staffroom so that the teachers can 'get to grips with it first' in order to examine their own 'prejudices as a staff' before 'working out ways of moving forwards'.

The staffroom as a 'private' space

One of the dominant ways in which the staffroom appeared to be characterised in these schools was as a 'private' space. McGregor (2003) uses Rose's (2002) research to demonstrate how spaces like the staffroom are often used to extend people's private lives out from the home; that personal photographs and cards are

displayed in these spaces in such a way that they extend space-time beyond the limit of the room and constitute it as familiar, familial and intimate. Based on the experiences and reflections of one of the authors, a *No Outsiders* research assistant, this section is written in the first person.

From my own observations in school I could certainly see the way in which the staffroom was used for private chatter, gossip and general relaxation, as the following field notes demonstrate:

I was told upon arrival at school today that this is a particularly nice school to work in, mainly because the staff are so friendly but also because the staff are extremely supportive of the project work and are quite open about sexuality – discussing it in an open-minded and unprejudiced manner on a daily basis. Despite having been told this I am still surprised at the level of personal chatter that plays out in this space and the (apparently) comfortable way in which the staff ask each other about their weekends, their partners and their latest 'famous crushes' whatever their presumed/acknowledged sexual orientation. This feels like a very different space to the classroom that I have just left – much more intimate, friendly and relaxed.

Yet despite this apparent ease and comfort with talking about sexuality among colleagues in the staffroom, what many teachers felt less comfortable about was the idea of these conversations leaving this 'private' space and entering a more 'public realm'. In some schools this was a particular concern with parents, often because it was feared that they may 'go even more public' and let the media know about the work in school. However, this was also a concern about the information entering the

private space of the home (and people's minds) after it had entered 'public space'. As Brickell's (2000) research suggests this is not an unfounded fear, for the idea that lesbian, gay and bisexual people 'flaunt' and 'promote' their sexuality and as such force their ideas onto other people, invading their private thoughts and spaces, is a dominant one that is regularly rehearsed in the media. As Brickell (2000) notes, ideas like these can be traced back to the work of Freud – his work enabling a perception of the mind as a series of spaces that are open to being territorialized, invaded and polluted.

Because of the distance from the children, parents and governors, the staffroom also appeared to be characterised as a 'safe space' – a space where the project (and other issues regarded as relating to (homo)sexuality) could be discussed away from potential outrage, violence and prejudice. In some of the schools that I visited I was warned about the use of 'more public' spaces in the school, such as the playground; about the ways in which both pupils and their parents would become agitated and aggressive towards members of staff. It is also no wonder that some teachers endeavoured to keep their discussions of (homo)sexuality bound to these 'safe' spaces, for as Skeggs (1999) suggests, fear is as significant a factor in people's use of space as violence itself. Within schools teachers are often expected to take responsibility for their own safety, and so if visibility (being recognised as LGBT or an ally) is a central means for instigated attack, then invisibility would appear to be the safest option. Indeed, a number of authors have commented on the need for 'safe' spaces for LGBT people. Hubbard, in particular, contends that given the fear of homophobic abuse, the metaphor of the private space of the closet appears to be an 'appropriate description of the schizophrenic spatial lives that many gays "not out" in public space lead' (Hubbard, 2001, p. 56).

The staffroom as an 'adult' space

In other schools the concern with the project 'leaving the staffroom' was much more related to concerns about the innocence of children. In this sense, the staffroom was often characterised as a particularly 'adult' space where issues of 'sex' and 'sexuality' could be discussed away from prying eyes and ears. Of course, there is a large body of literature that acknowledges the way in which childhood has been viewed as a time of 'presumed sexual innocence' – a time where children are presumed to remain untouched and untroubled by the cares of the adult sexual world to come (Jackson, 1982; Piper, 2000; Renold 2002; Kehily & Montgomery, 2004)[2]. As Jackson (1982) suggests, discussions of children and sex remain controversial (especially in schools), children are defined by adults as a special category of people deserving adult protection and sympathy. Sexuality is seen as a 'special area of life' and one that should be reserved for adulthood. Indeed, through observation I noted a marked difference in the way in which issues relating to the project (but in particular the ways in which the words 'sex' and 'sexuality') were talked about in the staffroom and how they were discussed in the rest of the school and reported this observation in my fieldnotes:

> As I am walking through the main corridor of the school today after break time I suddenly begin to realise how stilted our conversation about the project has become. This appears to be in direct contrast to the flowing and 'intimate' chats that we were having in the staffroom just minutes ago. Words like 'sexuality' and 'gay' are now being muttered as opposed to being stated confidently and I am aware that I too begin to follow the teacher's lead – I too

begin to mention the project in hushed tones and become constantly aware of

the children that surround me.

The way in which many of these teachers drew on dominant discourses of

childhood innocence is not a new finding – many teachers continue to struggle with

these ideas (especially given the confusion that Section 28[3] still holds for many).

What is interesting to note, however, is the way in which these relations constituted

and were constituted by social space; the ways in which the school corridors, in

particular, were being recognised as public, mobile, child-inhabited and therefore,

dangerous spaces to talk about sexuality (McGregor, 2004).

Staffroom space as 'fluid and dynamic'

It could be suggested that by being asked to keep (or to attempt to keep)

homosexuality in the staffroom many teachers were also being asked to attempt to

maintain the dominance of heterosexuality within the school. As Skeggs (1999)

proposes, it is essential to see these claims to space simultaneously as claims to

identity. Indeed, on an everyday basis the heterosexualised nature of the school space

often went unnoticed – many teachers were unaware of the ways in which

heterosexuality was spoken about or continually performed in the 'public' space of

the school (in the music that they played in whole school assemblies, in books that

they read to their classes and the conversations that they had in lessons about their

wives or husbands, see Binnie 1997; Bell *et al*.1994; DePalma and Atkinson, 2006a).

Nevertheless, there were many times when the project (and wider discussions

about homosexuality or homophobia) could not remain in the staffroom, but were

'outed' through incidents of homophobic bullying in the playground or through

children's own discussions about their lesbian parents. There were also times during the research where the 'safe' and 'private' nature of the staffroom space could be questioned. This was not just limited to those who identified as lesbian or gay, for in one school a female teacher who identified as straight felt too intimidated to talk about the project with others in the staffroom. This example perhaps confirms Skeggs' (1999) point that even if space is heterosexualised it does not always benefit all heterosexual people.

Neither schools nor their staffrooms are 'spatial and temporal islands', and so for effective sexualities equalities education to take place in schools we need to take account of these 'flows and networks' that begin and end outside the staffroom and the formally accepted space of the school.

After-school clubs: A shift in time

Massey argues against 'a view of place as bounded, as in various ways a site of authenticity, as singular, fixed…' (1994, p. 5) and further suggests that space and time work together in the creation of social space (and her notion of space in terms of 'envelopes of space-time' usefully reflects this). In the instance of the after-school club described in this vignette, classroom space literally changes in relation to time, and formal rules and relationships change also. This transformation, we argue, offers teachers huge potential for exploring sexualities equalities.

Here we will discuss the way in which an exploration of identities and labelling within the informal space of an after-school art club, as part of the *No Outsiders* project, opened up possibilities for discussing sexualities with year six primary school children. This project, which focused on the Holocaust, was facilitated

by a class teacher, a *No Outsiders* teacher-researcher (Kate) and visiting artists and writers.

Bringing 'gay' into the primary classroom

The session described here focused on labelling. It represented just one of three after-school art club sessions that were held in addition to a number of formal classroom sessions exploring marginality and difference within the context of the Holocaust. The session included eighteen children, the class teacher and Kate, and was also observed by a *No Outsiders* university researcher.

The children were initially asked to consider different 'outsider' words (for example 'gay', 'Muslim', 'disabled') and symbols (for example the LGBT rainbow flag, the Muslim sickle moon, the wheelchair signifying 'disabled'). Kate and her colleague then led the class in a discussion about the way in which such labels are used in both injurious ways (for example using the words 'gay' or 'Paki' as insults), and in positive ways (for example gay people and Muslim people using labels and symbols to identify themselves and having pride in these identities.) Finally the children were asked to choose a symbol or label to decorate in order to make it attractive and 'positive'.

This session explicitly focused therefore on the 'forbidden' subject of sexualities, albeit embedded within wider discussions around identities and marginality. Teacher-researchers throughout the *No Outsiders* project, and more particularly their colleagues, have expressed concerns about discussing sexualities within the classroom. Fears have included parental and wider public reaction, as well as specific concerns around how to appropriately introduce sexuality as a classroom subject. As described earlier in this paper, these fears have inevitably been influenced

by the notion that schools are havens of childhood 'innocence'. Through the explicit discussion of sexualities, Kate brought in to the primary classroom not just the 'forbidden' subject of sexuality, but also the doubly forbidden subject of LGBT sexualities, situating LGBT oppression alongside other oppressions, and actively breaking the silence on sexualities that often exists within such settings.

Coming out

One aspect of the session was to look at the use of certain words as abuse and to explore why they might be offensive. For example Kate asked the class how her Muslim colleague might have felt if she were called 'Paki' and followed this by asking the class how *she* might feel if she were called 'gay', informing the children that she *was* gay. This was the first time that the teacher-researcher had 'come out' to children in the school, and she described the experience in the following way:

> It was a very important moment for me, and while I have never been hidden, I have not felt I could come out before now... Coming out had to be something that happened in an appropriate context, and this was exactly right. Before the session I had thought I would say I was gay, but was not entirely sure. I used to teach this class, so felt at ease with them, and they with me. In fact, not teaching them now (except in art club) made it easier.

As Epstein and Johnson (1998) have highlighted, 'out' gay and lesbian teachers are threatened with the loss of their credibility, homophobia, adverse media reactions, a loss of privacy, and even (in the past at least) the loss of their jobs. As discussed earlier, teachers' personal sexual lives are not seen as an appropriate subject

in classroom spaces (Epstein & Johnson, 1998), despite the fact that heterosexual teachers are implicitly and explicitly 'out'. Arguments suggesting that LGBT teachers refrain from discussing their relationships within the school fail to acknowledge that children themselves might benefit from the openness of LGBT role models for a variety of reasons: because they may identify (or eventually identify) themselves as LGBT or just 'different', because they have gay or lesbian parents (Letts & Sears, 1999; Kissen, 2002) and because one of the duties of school is to prepare all children to live in a diverse society (DePalma & Jennett, 2007).

Safe spaces

The researchers within the project have spent considerable time exploring how it might be possible to make safe spaces in which children can talk about sexualities and difference, including the sexualities of their parents, their parents' friends, or indeed themselves. This vignette shows that the informal space of this after-school club appeared to operate as just such a safe space for Kate to discuss her own sexuality. She described this in the following communication:

> Coming out to the art club was easier, and a considered decision. It's true that it's more relaxed, as we all are there by choice…if things had gone wrong, or caused a much bigger reaction – I didn't have to stand up in front of them all day every day for the rest of the year! I think this also let them be freer with me, as there was not going to be a change of role to a more formal relationship, the following day.

The informal nature of the space was a significant factor in Kate's decision to reveal her sexuality to the children. The formal-to-informal status, that takes place in the transition between school hours and after-school hours is associated with the relaxing of formal teacher-pupil relationships, and with the blurring of boundaries between public and private a space is opened up in which it is possible to explore sexualities (including teachers' sexualities) – a subject usually relegated to the 'private' sphere. As Epstein and Johnson argue, 'schooling stands rather on the "public" side of public/private divisions, while sexuality is definitely on the private side' (1998, p. 1).

This moment, of coming out, appeared to open up the space in which children *themselves* could talk about same-sex relationships in safety. hooks (1994) argues that teachers must talk about themselves in the classroom before expecting children to do likewise. Kate reflected:

Their reaction made me feel very accepted and supported by them. Even [a] boy who had described gay as 'minging'[4] wanted to be sure I knew that he didn't think *I* was.

Early on in the session, this boy had responded to the word 'gay' with 'that's minging' and one of the girls had challenged him by suggesting that there wasn't anything wrong with being lesbian or gay. However, it was only later, when Kate revealed her own sexuality, that this girl mentioned that she had an aunt who was gay. The conversation then 'snowballed', with another girl saying she knew a number of people who were gay (friends of her parents), and that it upset her to hear them insulted. Finally, the boy told the class that other people called *him* gay and.

significantly, when the children were later asked to take an outsider symbol and decorate it, this boy chose the gay and lesbian pink triangle. Kate was positive about the effects of the project for this boy:

> The father's been in to talk to the head teacher to say 'I'm worried, my son's a fairy and what on earth am I going to do?' The father's at the stage where it's just not acceptable, 'surely not his son'. Which is why this kid has got a hard road over the next few years… But hopefully, I know it'll be a very small thing in his life really, but to have this little bit of work where we're saying it's OK, he can at least think 'well not everybody thinks the same way, and there are people who think it's OK'. And it'll be really important for him as well if his peer group is saying 'well that's all right, there's nothing wrong with that'

As Epstein *et al.* (2003, p. 20) suggest, 'a whole range of behaviours can be labelled "gay" when a boy does them', and this session (and the project more generally) allowed this boy to tell others that this issue was affecting him.

'Leaking'

As Massey suggests (1994) 'place' is not fixed and its boundaries are porous. Whilst this session took place within the boundary of the classroom, its effects clearly went beyond it. The teacher-researcher describes the way in which her coming out had effects that leaked beyond the classroom and wider school walls:

> The word must have spread throughout the school, but I have not had any comeback, nor has it been reported to me by any staff. I did however hear

from a couple of parents of children who were in the session. They described their children as 'buzzing' when they came out of the session. One parent, who had her daughter when in a lesbian relationship[5]…said it had prompted a very meaningful conversation between them about sexuality and relationships.

Here, the fear that a number of *No Outsiders* teacher-researchers have articulated, that parents might be offended or upset by the discussion of sexualities in primary classrooms is countered by positive parental reactions. As suggested, the session prompted a 'meaningful' discussion between one child and her mother that might not have happened otherwise

In effect, talking about sexuality in this context represented talking of what is usually considered to be 'private' in the 'public' realm. However, it might also be argued that together with the more informal nature of the after-school space, this discussion of sexuality transforms this 'public' space into 'private'. Seemingly paradoxically, this constitution of the 'private' then leaks outwards via discussions between parent and child into the 'public' world outside of the classroom, yet simultaneously *into* the 'private' world of the family. Thus the public and private boundary appears to have a permeability that challenges the notion that sexuality is necessarily contained in one sphere or another, and the notion that there is indeed such a boundary.

Conclusion: Deconstructing mind/body, public/private…school/life

Massey (1994) usefully makes the link between place and nostalgia, which resonates with the notion (critiqued in this paper) of childhood place as historically innocent, and free of adult (sexual) concerns. Further, as Paechter argues: 'Because

schooling is obsessed with the exclusion of the body, its explicit introduction is highly threatening' (2004, p. 317). However, as Paechter (2004, p. 309) further argues, '…the body and its sexuality are both ubiquitous and marginalised within schools'. Whilst sexuality is supposedly absent in the primary school classroom, it is also fully present both *through* that absence and the implicit presence of *hetero*sexuality. As Epstein and Johnson (1998) argue, children are schooled into gender and sexuality in school settings that are suffused (Epstein *et al.,* 2003) with sexuality that is, specifically, a *hetero*sexuality. This is seen in the heterosexualised fairytales that children are asked to read, the casual conversations made by staff about their heterosexual husbands and partners, and by the way in which, as Paechter (2004) suggests, children learn about their sexualised bodies via their separate use of boys' and girls' toilets and changing rooms.

Nevertheless, as Brickell (2000) suggests, spaces have not been seen as 'singular' or 'a priori' for some time now. Researchers have investigated the ways in which children have been able to territorialise and re-territorialise a number of traditionally accepted 'adult' spaces (Rasmussen, 2004), questioned the possibility of determining safe and violent and spaces (Skeggs, 1999; Harden, 2000) and explored the possibilities of 'private matters' entering 'public spheres' (e.g. gay and lesbian pride marches, Brickell, 2000). Many social geographers have followed Massey (1994) in suggesting that space and place needs to be seen as dynamic and multiple, extending beyond a singular context or place.

And so, despite the fact that our own perceived 'private' spaces can come to take on a material existence that we truly believe in, spaces can never really be fixed, for their boundaries are always open to continuous struggle and they are continually being made and remade through social relations (McGregor, 2004). For schools in

particular (Nespor, 1997, p. xiii), the division of space into the public and the private is never helpful, as it enables wider problems (such as homophobia) to be simply seen as school problems and it does not account for the ways in which education and learning (about issues like homosexuality and alternative family forms) could (and does) take place 'through constellations of relations that extend well beyond the classroom' (McGregor, 2003).

Massey writes that place is defined by social relations that spill over boundaries:

> The particular mix of social relations which are thus part of what defines the uniqueness of any place is by no means all included within that place itself. Importantly it includes relations which stretch beyond – the global as part of what constitutes the local, the outside as part of the inside. Such a view of place challenges any possibility of claims to internal histories or to timeless identities (1994, p. 5).

The *No Outsiders* project, as exemplified by vignettes like these and others, has offered us insight into the potential of consciously and persistently working across these apparently boundaried spaces within and beyond schools: the project leaks from the staffroom into the 'dangerous' spaces of the school corridor; it leaks inwards from teachers' own convictions and actions into the classroom, and outwards again to the community; it leaks from the pages of the project books to the homes and workplaces of project teachers' colleagues and friends; and it leaks back and forth between participating teachers' private and professional lives, with project teachers finding

themselves performing actions in ways – and in spaces – in which they would never have thought possible.

Inspired by the learning potential created by these conscious border crossings, we exhort educators to both deliberately reflect on the spatial geographies of schools and to deliberately transgress them. One of the most fascinating and productive aspects of the *No Outsiders* project has been simply noticing boundaries, mapping the various micro-cultures of different places in the school: the classroom, the corridor, the playground, the staff room are all interrelated yet bounded. These observations have inspired us to consider some important questions. What is acceptable and unacceptable to say and do? What happens when words and actions leak from one space to the other? What happens when we open new channels and allow the fully diverse and physical world beyond school to trickle into our carefully restricted school spaces? How can this be done so that spatial transgressions are productive while at the same time safe enough so that we don't lose our jobs?

Simply asking these questions is a first step, and testing them is a great stride. We might consider letting lesbian and gay identities, usually reserved for the staff room (if anywhere), leak into classrooms. We might discuss our own or friends' Civil Partnerships when we discuss marriage or civil rights, we might all refer to our partners as partners (rather than husbands, wives or 'friends') and engage in discussions with children about why. We might bring sexualised language from the playground into assemblies to unpack the meanings and implications, rather than allowing it to flourish unchallenged in the less adult-centred school spaces. We might invite our own and children's physical bodies into school, with all their complexities of sex, gender and sexuality, and we might discuss how and why these complexities are policed in certain ways (in some case erased entirely) inside and outside school.

Overall, we think the critical and persistent practice of boundary mapping and strategic leaking can be at least as effective in advancing sexualities equality in schools as any particular set of resources or curriculum guidance, and that this practice requires that teachers develop new ways of thinking that enable them to identify and question established school geographies.

Notes

[1] See www.nooutsiders.sunderland.ac.uk for more information about the *No Outsiders* project.
[2] We also recognise that this notion is raced and classed (Epstein *et al.,* 2003; Renold, 2005).
[3] Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act stated that a local authority shall not 'promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship'. It was repealed in 2003 (2000 in Scotland), and it did not actually apply directly to classroom teachers.
[4] Slang term indicating disgust.
[5] The mother currently lives with this daughter's father.

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