Surviving School as a Lesbian Student [1]

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ABSTRACT *This paper discusses the results of research undertaken in 1991 which investigates the barriers to quality education for lesbian and gay youth. The study was sponsored by the Ontario Ministry for Education through a transfer grant to the Ontario Institute for Education. Interviews with lesbian (and gay) students at the secondary level were conducted and information gathered from these interviews helped illuminate the organizational features of schools. The lesbian (and gay) interviewees acted as knowledgeable informants whose experiences in the school system served as the basis from which the study began and which enabled the researcher(s) to detect the various organizational factors that prevented lesbian (and gay) students from recieving an education that would realize their full potential.*

> At the end of grade 10, after I had come to the realisation [that I was a lesbian], I would spend a lot of time in the Chapel praying. That's what I thought I should do. I got to the point where I was so depressed with it and feeling so incredibly guilty about it. I was causing this evil, because I had just been nominated 'Catholic Student of the Year' for Ontario, and I just couldn't deal with these two [realisations] kind of together. So I tried to kill myself in the chapel we had in school. One of the teachers came in and took me to the guidance office and made me call the stress line. I talked to them. They kept me there all day. I begged them not to tell my parents that I had tried to do this—and [all along] I was waiting for somebody to ask me why, but they never did. (Girl, age 13) [2]

Introduction: theory and method

The recent *Report of the [Health and Human Services] Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide* from the USA (US Department of Health and Human Services, 1986) claims that gay/lesbian young people are overrepresented in adolescent suicide statistics. The report suggests that homosexual adolescents are two to six times more likely to commit suicide than their heterosexual counterparts. In England, the London Gay Teenage Group (Warren, 1984, p. 16) reports that one out of five of the 416 lesbian and gay young people that it surveyed, "at some point [had] felt under such intolerable pressure that they attempted

suicide". Here, in Canada, a Winnipeg study (Prairie Research Associates Inc., 1989, p. iii) of gay and lesbian minors revealed that of the 45 young people surveyed, two-thirds had contemplated committing suicide and one-quarter of them had attempted suicide. Likewise, of the 12 young lesbians I interviewed in Toronto, four mentioned at least one attempt to kill themselves. In 1990, George Smith and I undertook a study to investigate the barriers to the provision of quality education for young lesbians and gay youth. Restricted to the area of Toronto, we conducted parallel research: he worked with young men, while I interviewed young lesbians. We each used a feminist sociological methodology developed by Dorothy E. Smith. Specifically, George Smith and I each adopted the methodological procedures of institutional ethnography, which explicate the "institutional relations determining everyday worlds and how the local organization of the latter may be explored to uncover their ordinary invisible determinations in relations that generalize and are generalized" (Smith, 1987, p. 160). In other words, it is by investigating ethnographically a 'section' of the social world from the standpoint of the organisation of the practices and activities of those who, in various ways, are involved in its production (in this case, the work and activities of students, teachers, guidance counsellors, administrators, etc. provided the data for our ethnography) that we could begin to comprehend how young lesbians and gay youth are rendered invisible. By 'ethnography' Smith intends "a commitment to an investigation and explication of how 'it' actually is, of how 'it' actually works, of actual practices and relations" (Smith, 1987, p. 160). An institutional ethnography relies on the information gleaned from interviews; in this case, those with the students, who act as informants, and who describe their everyday lives, giving specific examples and experiences which serve as the basis of analysis of the social organisation of the institution. Consequently it was possible to see how, because of their invisibility, students are seldom in a position to break the relative silence which envelopes their lives at school.

In 1986, the Province of Ontario passed Bill 7, thus extending its human rights code to include sexual orientation as a prohibited ground of discrimination in housing, employment and services. However, this did not necessarily guarantee the rights of lesbians and gay men nor did it recognise lesbian and gay relationships. Likewise, equal rights of access to quality education for young lesbians and gay youth were not essentially changed by the passing of Bill 7, in the same way as sexism and racism have not been eliminated through legislation—or even curricular changes. Bill 7, however, does leave school districts in Ontario open to human rights complaints. Despite Ontario's Human Rights Code, only one board of education in Ontario [3] is attempting to recognise publicly the needs of young lesbians and gay youth, and no board to date has made any provisions to allow them adequate support nor a positive and safe environment in which to come out.

For the purposes of this investigation, and because we believe that the experiences of lesbians and gay men may have common features, but are essentially and fundamentally different, George Smith and I divided the research according to our respective genders. Consequently, this paper will address only the problems faced by lesbian adolescents within the school system [4]; it will describe their experiences and provide an analysis of the social relations of schooling, of their families, and of the dominant heterosexual society, all of which shape and determine these experiences.

From the beginning, our decision not to incorporate young women and young men into the same research seemed appropriate. Once we began our interviews, it became increasingly evident that, not only did their stories and experiences differ, but such factors as at what age they recognised their homosexuality, where they found support, or

how they expressed their sexuality, all had enough profoundly dissimilar elements that it would have done justice to neither to present them together. For instance, young men tended to name and express their sexuality, on average, at a younger age than young women (Powell, 1987, p. 203). This statement is explicitly borne out when confronting the very high proportions of gay males to lesbians in youth organisations. An added factor is that male sexuality is often evident publicly: men, in general, claim and conduct much of their experiences (including sexual) in public spaces. The reasons lesbians are more likely to self-identify and act out their sexuality later than gay males may include, I suggest, that women, in general, are socially expected not to express sexual needs, nor is it seen to be appropriate for women to initiate sexual activity at a young age. This often leads many young women to make few conscious decisions early in their lives regarding their sexual preference. Moreover, compulsory heterosexuality is imposed on women differently from the way it is imposed on men. For women, it is enforced through such practices as the enormous social pressures to marry, to please men and to be appealing and available to them. These forms of constraints are more likely to be socially expressed through ideological than through repressive restrictions as they are for gay men. For instance, gay men are especially apt to become the brunt of violence and 'gay bashing' by (heterosexual) males because (I can only speculate) what is perceived as the betrayal of 'masculinity' is considered particularly serious. Lesbians are gay-bashed when they are seen to have usurped male privilege or to have crossed the boundaries of male prerogatives. However, for the most part, lesbians experience compulsory heterosexuality as a social invisibility, a silence surrounding their sexual preference, while for gay men, compulsory heterosexuality is often articulated violently.

In a modern, patriarchal, Western capitalist society like Canada [5], white male supremacy is contingent upon discernible differences being established between men and women, rich and poor, white people and people of colour. These differences, although contentiously based on a physical reality, often on biologically 'demonstrable' grounds, have to be maintained ideologically, socially, economically and politically through institutional structures. The education system is an institution governed and supported by the state in this country and can safely be said to reflect hegemonic ideology. What is taught at school is what is constructed as knowledge—defined by those in a position of power and serving to maintain the *status quo*.

Historically, as well as currently, one of the basic tenets of white male capitalist power (but not restricted to it) is that the distinctions between (white) males and the rest of society become common knowledge, perceived as 'natural', or, in Gramsci's terms, as 'common sense', a concept Chantal Mouffe interprets as that "which presents itself as the spontaneous philosophy of the man of the street, but which is the popular expression of 'higher' philosophies" (Mouffe, 1979, p. 186). Once the distinctions are established, they are institutionalised, reproduced, and thus become part of our everyday lives. Consequently, since power in this society resides with (white) males, they prescribe the norms and they become the measure against which all others are compared. However, individuals and groups adopt their particular subversions, produce counter-hegemonic ideologies (Mouffe, 1979, p. 193), live out their peculiar contradictions. Even though conformity is sustained and regulated through an entire ideological structure of laws and traditions, legitimised through institutions such as schools, churches, media, etc., and rewarded economically and politically, many live their differences behind acceptable personae.

Although many hegemonic principles operate to maintain male supremacy, one of the most fundamental is heterosexuality. (See Rich, 1980; Buchbinder, *et al.*, 1987; Cartledge

& Ryan, 1983.) However, heterosexuality itself depends upon the power differential which characterises male/female relations, and therefore on the differences which justify this power. These differences are institutionalised in gender roles: masculinity and femininity. Because men are in power, masculinity becomes the measuring rod against which femininity is judged (and found wanting); it becomes the determinant, the relevant descriptor, and as such, the defining ingredient of power.

Homosexuality, both in men and in women—but for different reasons—threatens the hegemony of masculinity. Gay men, stereotypically perceived as 'effeminate', generally jeopardise the gender roles because they, often purposefully, blur the distinctions between masculinity and femininity. It must be understood that gay men do not necessarily reject masculinity: more likely, they manage it differently from heterosexual men, and they continue to enjoy male privilege. Lesbians threaten masculine hegemony as well. They challenge gender roles, they become financially independent and they remove themselves from being sexually available to men—a prerogative that heterosexual men believe is rightfully theirs. Moreover, lesbians, as women, occupy a different position in society from that of gay men. But, since more privilege is attached to masculinity than to femininity, tomboys, on the average, seem to have an easier time than the gentler males whose image defies traditional masculine prescriptions.

Schools, as transmitters of official ideologies, cannot afford to condone male or female homosexuality, even if the law demands that lesbians and gay men be protected from discrimination. Elsewhere, in an article about lesbian teachers and Bill 7, I described how a particular board of education which considers itself relatively progressive preferred to bury the then new recommendation protecting the rights of lesbians and gay teachers (Khayatt, 1990). Similarly, officially requiring teachers to include homosexuality within the curriculum, or even readily making available information about the topic, is tantamount to an acknowledgement that there might be an alternative to heterosexuality. To date, virtually all boards of education in Ontario have a tacit (if not official) policy that proselytising about homosexuality is forbidden in the schools. Certainly, under particular conditions, the topic may be dealt with, but not presented as an alternative sexual option. Yet, some teachers may discuss the topic of homosexuality in their classes, even if it is not in the official guidelines. Very often, however, even those teachers who are politicised or who are lesbian or gay, have to be careful in the way they deal with questions about homosexuality when and if these come up in class. Therefore, it is no coincidence that the students interviewed all remonstrated against the lack of information, and that whatever mention of homosexuality they reported was frequently a student-originated challenge to the *status quo*.

Research Design and Context

Various organisations and support systems in Metro Toronto were consulted in the search for potential interviewees [6]. All interviews were conducted between 1 May 1990 and 30 April 1991. I was able to reach 12 lesbians. Each respondent was self-selected. For this reason, most of the interviewees were already self-identified lesbian. This means that I did not interview anyone who was confused about her sexual orientation, who was still going through the process of coming out. I worked from a simple interview schedule which served to focus the interview, but which permitted me to modify the questions to adapt to the situation at hand. In other words, the interview schedule was not meant to be a questionnaire, but to provide me with broad topics (such as, for instance, when and how the interviewee began to self-identify as a lesbian; what mention of 'homosexuality'

did she hear in class, school, assembly; the attitudes of various peers, teachers, or administration toward the topic, etc.) which would refresh my memory and provide a source of cohesiveness between different interviews. Complete anonymity was guaranteed to every participant, and each was assured that names and places would be changed to protect their identity. The generalisations which can be made when using an institutional ethnography are based on examining the everyday world of these students, making visible the determinants of the social relations of which they are a part, and uncovering the local organisation of the schools, thus contextualising their lives within the education system. Their stories were and are not meant to be a sample. They were young women who granted us an interview. They represented only themselves and no statistical generalisations can be made based upon their experiences. Their role was one of informants, providing me (the researcher) with an insight into the social organisation of the institution (the school) in which they worked. Of the 12 young women who participated in my research, seven were white, two had a parent of different race or ethnicity from the other, three were Asian. They were either middle class or came from low income families. None lived on the streets [7]. All lived in Toronto at the time of the interviews; however, two came from the Maritime Provinces, and two others went to schools in small communities close to Toronto, one was from Ottawa, and the rest were born, raised and schooled in this city, Toronto. Three students attended Catholic schools. These schools are provincially funded but retain a proviso in the Education Act of Ontario that they: "may establish and maintain programs and courses of study in religious education for pupils in all schools under [their school boards'] jurisdiction" (Government of Ontario, 1990).

Although all of the students I interviewed had admitted to themselves that they were lesbian, the ways in which each gained cognisance of her sexual orientation were different, not to say unique. The coming out processes are seldom easy. Each incident depends on the social context, on the emotional/political awareness of the person coming out as well as on the emotional/political openness of the one(s) being informed. It is the way each individual handles her own special events, given the lack of safety surrounding her, in this case, at school, but taking into consideration the need to disclose, that finally produces the specificity of each account. Gloria Krysiak (1987, p. 305) suggests that: "The 'coming out' process for adolescents is particularly difficult because, as minors, adolescents are dependent on their families, lack access to good information, have little mobility and no legal rights in the area of sexual preference". Coming out within the context of the school system has its special problems, not the least of which are peer pressure to conform sexually, to be perceived as 'popular', and to be seen to date the 'opposite sex'.

Analysis of Data

Beginning from the experience of lesbian students leads the researcher to examine the complexities of and the contradictions within the social structure. Each student had different experiences in the school system and each perceived these experiences differently according to the social context in which she found herself. Several of the interviewees felt that, although their own circumstances were not negative, theirs was a specific 'reason' which would somehow 'explain' why they had a relatively easy time at school. It is precisely these complexities that an institutional ethnography locates and makes visible: that for every hegemonic, 'common-sense' consciousness and behaviour which exists within a particular context, there are also counter-hegemonic ones which are

articulated at the same time. These contradictions may exist side by side even within the same person. For instance, one young woman spoke of extraordinary education she received as part of a 'gifted' programme, one that permitted her and her schoolmates to experience an openness she believed did not exist anywhere:

> But the thing is that being in the gifted programme was really wonderful because, unlike a lot of other people that I've met since then who talk of what a really rough time they had in high school because they had to go out on all these fake dates and stuff like that, there was no pressure on us to go out on dates if we didn't want to. (Age 16)

This same young woman, in glaring contradiction to her original statement, later described her 'gifted' programme as lacking in information regarding lesbians and gays:

> I can remember in our Modern Western Civilisation course we learned about how good liberalism was. But the only black person we learned about was Martin Luther King and he was optional. Women: we learned about Mary Wollstonecraft and one other woman. But it was ridiculous that, although the course went up to 1984, we didn't learn anything like Stonewall [8], we never studied Oscar Wilde, in our drama section, and Jane Rule wasn't touched upon in our Canadian Fiction.

Young lesbians and gay youth (and adults) do not grow up in a vacuum. They, too, are a product of the social organisation of which they are a part and in which their experiences are embedded. For example, they readily described and analysed clearly the ways in which they experience sexism. However, when asked to speak of their experiences within the school system *as lesbians*, they frequently did not perceive the subtle ways in which lesbian and gay sexuality was made invisible. They were certainly conscious of the blatant expressions of homophobia, but heterosexism, the taking for granted that everyone is heterosexual, often eluded them until sometime later:

> I guess I never really thought about it at the time. If I read a textbook or something came up in a discussion in class, I wouldn't think: Oh we're not mentioning anything about gays and lesbians here, maybe we should. I mean, now I would automatically, in my classes if it was skipped over or something, I would notice it, but in high school, I thought there was no reason to be included. I felt very marginalised and I thought I'm supposed to be marginalised because I'm different. (Age 17)

Several of the interviewees were aware of the discrimination they were undergoing at school. They experienced it as a general climate of rejection of lesbians and gays, a negativity which forced some of them into a self-imposed isolation:

> I never had any close friendships in high school because I was afraid that something would happen and that I would slip up and say something. I was one of the top students and I was afraid that I was going to lose all these privileges that I had if this kind of thing accidentally came out. (Age 16)

Conversely, a couple of young women felt their isolation was a consequence of having come out. For instance:

> People loved me, students loved me and I was nominated for student council. Then, in grade 11, everybody knows that I'm a lesbian [and now] most people seem to back off and don't want to talk to me and say hi—they say hi, but it's

> not the same ... The funny part is, when I sit down [in the auditorium] no one will sit around me, that's the worst. They'll leave a space, or you know what I mean, and that's hurting me inside, because I think it's my choice to come out or not, but I did come out and I'm glad of it. That's what you get when you come out. (Age 15)

A remarkably discernible theme which appears in the interviews is the constant recurrence of experiences where mention of homosexuality within the general school context meant pejorative allusions or verbal abuse by their peers:

> ... it was talked about just in derogatory terms—calling someone a 'fag'. There was nothing about lesbians at all.

> ... my school has a really successful football team, like they win every year. They're big on being manly man and they're really homophobic. They're blatant about it, jokes right, left and centre, some bragged that they used to go 'gay bashing', and there are definitely homosexuals on these teams, as there would be in soccer or hockey teams, and just the uncomfortableness they must feel, being subjected to that kind of verbal abuse directed toward any homosexual, though it may not be direct.

> ... nothing but verbal bashing, like 'fag' or 'dyke' ...

> I remember there was this snowshoeing contest, it was [the school's] winter carnival and I had my favourite plaid jacket and jeans and I was doing quite well in the contest and someone yelled out 'fucking dyke', and I remember that comment, you know, because I felt vulnerable enough as it was ...

> You would hear a lot of names in the school yard: 'Oh, he's a faggot'. You know, or 'fag'. I didn't hear about the word 'dyke' until I came out.... I remember one day, the first time I heard it [faggot], I ran home. It was like, 'God! I have to find out what this word is. I think it's my identity!' And I looked up 'faggot', and it said: 'a bundle of sticks', or something, in the Webster's dictionary. I thought, no, I guess it doesn't identify me. Nor does it identify anyone they'd been calling 'faggot'.

One of the most striking features that is described by almost all respondents is the official silence of the school system regarding the topic of homosexuality. This silence was expressed in at least two distinct ways: (a) the invisibility, intentional or otherwise, of any gay/lesbian-related topics, (b) the suppression or distortion of information regarding lesbian or gay sexuality and the refusal to permit official lesbian or gay speakers to make presentations at school assemblies or in the classroom.

(a) Invisibility

The invisibility of lesbian (and gay) students took as many forms within the school system as it does within the larger society. However, the social organisation that is peculiar to the school system helped both to shape and to inform how lesbian and gay sexuality would remain unacknowledged.

One of the most prevalent and significant ways lesbian and gay sexuality was (and is) rendered invisible is by simply not mentioning it, by not having any information regarding its existence available in schools, and by not including it in any section of the curriculum. This does not necessarily mean that the topic never gets mentioned within

the context of the school system. Notwithstanding what appears to be an 'official' silence which surrounds the subject, a number of teachers and students do put it on an individual class agenda. According to the experiences of the students I interviewed, these cases are mostly exceptions. The following are the words of one of the interviewees:

> I was looking for information because when you're coming out you go through a stage where you need to be swarmed by information. And there was nothing, not even in libraries. I looked in the school library and the only place I found anything was in the dictionary. I went to the extent of looking it up in the encyclopedia and actually one of the pages had been vandalised by one of the students. So there was nothing for me. In the Guidance Office, you can stand there and look at all the pamphlets and stuff, but there was nothing. (Age 16)

This next young woman, slightly older, encountered a similar blankness. Asked whether she remembered being taught anything regarding lesbian or gay sexuality, she replied:

> Never formally. I can remember one English class, it was a creative writing class, and at the beginning of the class a different student would bring up a discussion topic to give us, topics to write about in our journals and issues around AIDS came up and homosexuality, but I can't remember it ever being taught formally in a positive or negative context. No I can't really remember it at all.

And another student remembered:

> I never encountered it formally—like, it would come up, but it was never addressed as a topic by the teacher. The teacher didn't take the initiative to say I'm going to discuss this. Not even in sociology, no, it wasn't touched on then. It was an option you could study if you wanted to, and luckily people did, and they informed the class.

One teacher, after presenting the poetry of Audre Lorde and never mentioning that she was a lesbian, went on to suggest that, perhaps, one of Shakespeare's sonnets could be addressed to a man. The interviewee reports: "But we did talk about a sonnet that Shakespeare wrote, like a gushy one to a man, and our whole class kind of laughed and all that and then she explained that it was to his patron and you're supposed to exaggerate the good characteristics of your patron". The teacher's suggested denial of the possibility of Shakespeare's homosexuality coupled with the students' laughter and joking about the tone of the sonnet, effectively contradicted what might have been an intended mention of gay sexuality.

Outside the classroom context, the administration was a lot less subtle. One student wanted a gay speaker for the AIDS Awareness assembly:

> I approached the principal for permission, and he said that he wanted a speaker who was not gay. No gay speakers at all. And he said that he was scared of what the parents would say when kids went back home and said, 'oh, there was a gay guy today speaking about AIDS at our school'. Like, he was really careful. He didn't want any negative exposure.

The student challenged the principal. She even had several teachers back her, but the administration stood firm. In any case, when the speaker did come to the school, he was indeed gay, but he did not identify himself as such "because he's with PWA [People With AIDS], and that's government funded or something".

Another student came out while attending a Catholic school. She informed me that all topics regarding sexuality were taught under the rubric of 'religion', whereas in the public school system it may come under, amongst other subjects, health. The interviewee understood that the significance of learning about sexuality under the subject of religion meant that sexual behaviour is rendered a moral issue, expressed, for example, in terms of 'sin' and 'purity'. The student explained that she had tried to commit suicide, and had been sent for counselling. She also tried other tactics to bring attention to her plight, but nothing seemed to work:

> I actually ran away from home three times and used to come back with the police and nobody ever asked me why. My parents didn't ask why. The school didn't ask why. I refused to be confirmed by the Catholic Church and nobody asked me why. I didn't go through [confirmation] with my classmates. I decided I didn't want this because it's obviously a conflict. Nobody ever asked why. And I just kept consciously rerouting these anxieties and feelings and intensities into my work and into the social awareness things I'd become involved in and I was very aware why I was doing things.

The practices by students, teachers and administration that produced the invisibility of lesbian and gay sexuality within the school context were in some cases deliberate and in others unintentional. However, both were equally effective in maintaining the appearance that lesbian and gay sexuality did not exist. The silence which surrounded the subject, although not complete, generated a feeling of isolation in the lesbian students I interviewed. Whereas the social isolation they experienced is evident in their words, their most profound sense of isolation came from being marginalised, from never being able to speak freely about their sexuality, and from almost always feeling that an essential part of their being is either dismissed, despised, or deleted from the everyday life of being a high school student.

In some cases there was surreptitious recognition of lesbian or gay teachers. This often did not improve conditions for the interviewees since, for the most part, these teachers prefer not to reveal their sexual orientation. A lesbian (or gay) student could, in effect, pose a problem for closeted teachers (see Khayatt, 1992) in that she (or he) is more apt to recognise them. Lesbian and gay teachers are almost always 'invisible' themselves and are therefore not of any obvious assistance. The recognition of a lesbian teacher enabled one interviewee to see the consequences of being recognised by her peers:

> Most of my friends are female and they admire her. She's very intelligent and she knows a lot and she's nice and all that. But for the guys, I was talking about this with a friend of mine and we were saying that the guys feel threatened or something. They make rude comments, tasteless jokes. I don't know, it's just kind of weird.

For another respondent, the very fact that she suspected having lesbian or gay teachers in her school provided her with support. She admits: "I knew of one teacher who I was about 90% sure he was gay and another teacher I was about 70% sure he was gay. So that was kind of exciting knowing they were there". Finally, one more interviewee mentioned recognising a lesbian teacher:

> I saw her at the Rape Crisis Dance. I saw her there and she just kind of freaked out. I said, 'What are you doing here?' And she said, 'No, what are you doing here?', and I said, 'Oh, it will be a secret, no problem'. And she kind of put pressure on me too. I wish I hadn't seen her at the dance at all, because at school I see her and she acts different.

Silence is a form of discrimination. It renders the individual or group invisible because they are not part of the norm. The silence that enveloped the schools regarding the subject of homosexuality affected the students in myriad ways: some reported feeling terrified about what was happening to them amidst what seemed like universal reticence to mention the topic; for others, it resulted in a 'chilling effect' where they themselves hesitated or refused to bring up the subject for fear of being 'branded'. A number mentioned that the silence itself reinforced their suspicions that the topic was taboo, that what they were undergoing was, in some way, bad. One young lesbian, still attending school, said: "I don't know, sometimes I feel like I'm the only lesbian in the world". Finally, another young woman (age 23), when asked if lesbians were mentioned, even negatively, in her school, summed up the situation with her comment: "No, sadly, not even that sort of a taboo way".

(b) Suppression or Distortion of Information

The passive pretence that lesbian and gay sexuality does not exist in the school system produced feelings of unease for the interviewees. However, it is the active suppression or distortion of information which generated a climate of fear and rage in those young students. Not only was the homophobia explicit, but often teachers did nothing to counteract it. One young woman described the 'ignorance' which surrounded the topic. Asked to elaborate, she said:

> Well, some say that kids raised by gay parents will grow up to be gay. Or, [being gay] is just a phase, it will pass, it comes after puberty for some people. Some of the stuff is outrageous: there's something wrong with their chromosomes, poor conditioning; all sorts of things ... And, I'd never heard a teacher rebut [this stuff] in any way, in a positive way, and support homosexuals or clarify that, no, that's not true. I never came across that.

For another student whose lover had inadvertently come out at her school, the comments were direct and more threatening, yet no teacher came to her defence:

> She would be walking down the hall and they'd say: 'Dyke, here comes the dyke, or ...' She lost a couple of friends because of that. So that's a pretty bad experience, to realise that there are people who do have really negative reactions to that kind of thing. (Age 16)

One interviewee who was in the process of coming out at the time, continued to deny her sexuality because, "I didn't understand how could someone as feminine as I was be attracted to another female. It didn't make sense". In her case, one of her teachers made the situation worse for her:

> My gym teacher actually confronted me on whether or not I was a lesbian, and of course, I was still denying it; I didn't know, and I thought she was wrong anyway, so I said, 'how can you say that?' And she said some comment to me afterward about, if you were, I would accept it but I wouldn't tolerate it. I mean, if these teachers don't want to tolerate it, they're not going to want to talk about it a whole lot either. (Age 17)

In the confusion of coming to terms with her sexuality, this interviewee was reading Margaret Laurence and realising for the first time "that women actually did have sex". However, shortly after this momentous realisation, the student encountered what others thought about women loving women. She elaborated:

> There was reference to [women having sex with each other] in another of [Margaret Laurence's] books, *Rachel, Rachel*, which I searched out and read. I had these books with me one day and one of the guys got up on the stage and started talking about 'cunt-suckers' and how these poor women, all they do is ... and me, the language he was using, oh my God, you don't mention that and I was taken aback so much. He picked up this book and just happened to open it to this page and he started going on about 'these poor women having to eat pussy all the time' or something along these lines. He was taken to the principal's office and we never found out what happened to him. He was back in school the next day. That was the first actualisation for me, that women had sex.

While the above incident happened several years ago, the next one demonstrates that the situation has changed very little. One of the informants, slightly older than the average age of the other interviewees, and living with a lover who is in her early thirties, told of a very recent experience which occurred a couple of weeks prior to the interview:

> My lover's daughter came home from school and told me that in her health class her teacher had made disparaging remarks about lesbians and when she [lover's daughter] said, 'What is wrong with that?' because at home she had her mother and myself, her teacher said, 'Oh, well, maybe *you* are!' I couldn't believe that a teacher, no matter what his or her prejudices, would say something like that to a very impressionable 13-year-old.

Suppression and distortion of information were not the only expression of intolerance suffered by lesbian (and gay male) students in the school system. Although girls and women do not suffer the same incidence of gay bashing that boys and men do, they do live with their share of violence in their lives. Many of my young respondents described examples of this violence, both to their gay male friends and to themselves. The following exchange is particularly relevant because of the consistent and negative response of the administration, from the point of view of the student:

Q. [Since you came out at school] have you ever been approached by anybody who was curious or who had questions for you?

A. Not questions, but a comment like: 'We all know who you are, so you don't have to hide it'. I go, 'Oh, shit!' and I beat her up. No, I didn't. I just put a garbage can on her head.

Q. Was she provoking you? Was she being mean?

A. Well, she was discriminating against me and everything—calling me names, and so on.

Q. That does not sound pleasant.

A. No, it wasn't. It was a bad experience.

Q. Was it at school?

A. Yes, it was in school.

Q. Did anybody say anything?

A. No. Nobody. Well, the principal got upset with me. He didn't get upset with her, I don't know why. That makes me wonder. The principal always likes sticking to the person that I'm fighting with, and it's very hard, actually. (Age 15, still in school)

Conclusion

The 12 young lesbians I interviewed, who served as informants in this institutional ethnography, survived the school system. We have little data regarding those who, because they are lesbian, cannot continue their education. We know from unofficial accounts that some of those who do not endure the taunts and/or the discovery of their sexual orientation are frequently suspended or expelled. But often, they quit. Their voices have not been heard. Even those who survive, like the 12 students to whom I spoke, report the difficulties of lack of support, of misinformation, or of silence which surrounds the topic of homosexuality. Their existence in the schools (overtly or covertly) is subversive and counter-hegemonic. Their stories are a clear testimony that homophobia and heterosexism are solidly entrenched within the school systems and within the larger society. Each of their stories is different from the others, yet common threads run through them. The lack of information regarding homosexuality, as well as the unacknowledged silence surrounding the topic recurs persistently in the students' accounts. Both these issues unequivocally reflect a social organisation which is, to say the least, hostile to homosexuality. It comes as no surprise, then, that many of the individuals who are presently working to improve conditions for lesbian and gay people in general, and students in particular, often say quite blatantly: 'This oppression is going to be the toughest to overcome'. Perhaps they mean that, because it was diagnosed, dissected and described, yet, paradoxically hidden and concealed in shame or sin, perhaps because it is still too threatening to the *status quo*, perhaps because so many people deny its possibilities, it will require an enormous effort to recognise it and put it on the table as an oppression that cannot be tolerated any longer.

As noted above, lesbian or gay teachers are seldom inclined to bring up the topic of homosexuality in class for fear of exposing their own sexual orientation and thus risk losing their positions as teachers [9]. Each one of the 12 young women I interviewed affirmed that even if she recognised that particular teachers were lesbian or gay, she would never 'out' them because she realised that it would jeopardise their jobs. However, even if the sexuality of lesbian or gay teachers were to become known, they could not stand as 'official' role models because the subtextual information conveyed in the concept of 'role model' is that it be publicly recognised as such. In other words, teachers would have to be hired officially as gay or lesbian, or perceived to have succeeded despite or because of their sexual orientation before they could be appreciated as role models to emulate. One the one hand, suspecting or knowing about the homosexuality of teachers may help gay and lesbian students know that they are not alone, that they may look up to some of these teachers, and that living as a lesbian is possible; on the other hand, it does not provide an example to the rest of school/society that it is 'OK' to be homosexual.

The literature generated by the helping professions (see Gay Teachers' Group, 1987; Heron, 1983; *Radical Teacher* 24 and 29; Rofes, 1989; Lazier, 1990) often discusses the reasons why barriers to quality education exist for lesbian and gay students by arguing that the lack of information which exists within the context of schools is a reflection of a homophobic society which denies the existence of homosexuality. This same literature also clearly brings out the lack of school support systems for young lesbians and gay youth. Some of the solutions considered by the helping professions include such recommendations as schools should provide services aimed at lesbian and gay students, policies should be initiated to help change attitudes toward homosexuality, compassion or respect for homosexuals should be taught—all of these steps, they suggest, would stop

discrimination against young lesbians or gay youth. Of course, I agree, these changes would help, especially in the immediate future. And, as in the case of racism and sexism, legislating anti-discriminatory policies, adding people of colour and women to the curriculum may change the attitudes of those who are forced into complying with rules that are not theirs. However, these measures are not enough. If we are truly looking to eliminate oppression on the basis of gender, race and sexuality, we have to challenge the structure of power as it is presently composed, to resist current hegemonic ideologies, and, in the case of homosexuality specifically, we have to call into question heterosexuality. Each one of us, as individuals and as teachers, must be (or become) consciously aware of our role as change agents, and, wherever possible, we must attempt to work together to achieve an equitable society.

According to the lesbian students I interviewed, several options (not all mutually exclusive) are open to young lesbians and gay youth in the school system today: (a) concealing their sexuality and remaining invisible; (b) coming out publicly and putting up with harassment; (c) seeking a gay/lesbian community outside the school—an option not often possible for rural youth; and (d) leaving school. It is evident that none of these options provides for quality education, and most may, indeed, be a cost to society in the long run.

The legislation of anti-discriminatory policies does help, yet to date, no young lesbian or gay youth has challenged a school board for failing to provide her/him with quality education. Teachers should be made aware of the issues of sexual orientation and ought to be made to deal systematically with the subject of homosexuality as well as sexism and racism [10]. These topics should be incorporated in the curriculum, in every discipline. In the case of sexuality, as with sexism and racism, it is by talking about the issue, by insisting on its existence and its importance as an issue, by discussing it, and challenging stereotypical misconceptions, only then can we normalise it. The possibilities for change are more present than ever before since some faculties of education in various universities have hired openly lesbian or gay professors to teach teachers. These suggestions may not eliminate discrimination against homosexuals, but they would make the issue visible, present, and non-exceptional. They would certainly deal with the current marginalisation of young lesbians and gay youth, and thus, possibly provide them with a chance toward quality education.

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NOTES

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[2] Ages given at the end of quotes refer to the age at which the incident occurred rather than the current age of the respondent. This is in order to guarantee that no informant is recognised as a continuous presence. (The reason this student is only 13 in grade 10 is because she skipped two grades.)

[3] The Toronto Board of Education has recently published a resource guide for teachers of health education in secondary schools which includes information on the topic, general and specific strategies for teaching a unit on sexual orientation and a resource guide. The title of this guide is *Sexual Orientation: focus on homosexuality, lesbianism and homophobia* (Toronto Board of Education, 1992).

[4] George Smith has written as (as yet) unpublished paper where he presented his data separately.

[5] This analysis is intended to situate and ground the experiences of the young women I interviewed in a social and political context. It is not meant to imply that discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation occurs *only* in Western capitalist systems.

[6] These include: Lesbian and Gay Youth of Toronto (LGYT); Central Toronto Youth Services; the Toronto Board of Education Student Support Services, Counselling and Information on Human Sexuality; Lesbian Youth Peer Support (LYPS); and Street Outreach Support (SOS).

[7] Despite a year-long search, I was not able to interview any 'street kids' for this research. The women who presented themselves at the agency which supports street youth (SOS) were often living off selling their bodies. They did not identify themselves as lesbian. For an excellent account of their lives across Canada, see: Marlene Weber, *Street Kids. The Tragedy of Canada's Runaways.* (1991).

[8] 'Stonewall' was a gay bar in New York City which was stormed by police in the summer of 1969, and where the patrons stood up and fought back. This date, 27 June 1969, commemorates the beginning of the Gay Liberation Movement in North America.

[9] I deal in depth with the issue of the relationship between lesbian teachers and students in my book: *Lesbian Teachers: an invisible presence* (1992, pp. 157–189).

[10] Of course, it is not in all situations that teachers are able to introduce the topic of homosexuality. For instance, in the United Kingdom, Clause 28 makes it impossible to 'promote the teaching' of homosexuality in schools. Therefore, the kind of changes suggested in the paper would be unsuitable in those social and political contexts that prohibit mention of the subject. (For a good article on the effects of Clause 28, see Simon Watney, 1991, pp. 387–401.)

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