

Boxing in Our Youth: Lesbian Adolescents Speak Out About Their
Secondary School Experiences

by

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ABSTRACT

Four lesbian adolescents (ages 18-20) were interviewed to learn their thoughts, opinions and experiences within secondary school. This study is qualitative in nature stemming from a feminist perspective. The interviews were informal and unstructured, organised around specific themes. My personal experience was also incorporated into the study through the use of journal entries.


The students in this research indicated that schools were not safe nor supportive environments for them as lesbians. Throughout their schools there was a general hostility toward homosexuality. Specifically homosexuality was ridiculed by students and was often linked with disease in sex education classes. Their school libraries did not carry books with lesbian content and if they did, the books were not accessible to lesbians

The school system has a responsibility to meet the needs of all students. Silence around lesbian issues can produce and perpetuate a hostile environment for lesbian students. Teachers can create a supportive environment through the opening of dialogue and by preventing/discouraging homophobic name-calling. As an invisible minority with little opportunity for positive discourse, these young women appreciated and needed teachers to take a stand against homophobia in the classrooms and hallways of their schools.


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Chapter I

Introduction

No oppressed group has ever been granted dignity, respect, and human rights by remaining silent. (Marrow, 1993, p. 658)

Purpose of My Research

The expectations and atmosphere of secondary schools, combined with the onset of adolescence, can often result in a difficult experience for many youth. Minorities in schools face particular difficulties. Many studies have looked at ethnic minorities in schools but few have focussed on the issues faced by lesbian youth. With this research I want to give self-identified lesbians a forum to describe their experiences in the school system. The four self-identified lesbians I interviewed offer stories of resistance to traditional gender roles as well as, "coming out" stories, to their impressions of student and teacher attitudes toward homosexuality.

Through listening to their classroom/school experiences, I want readers to achieve a greater awareness of the needs of lesbian students. A broad social awareness is critical to teachers as they interact with adolescents. Moreover, teachers need to examine their role in the school system and the ways that they may reproduce inequalities. McLaren (1994) writes:

For teachers [critical pedagogy] means that we must begin candidly and critically to face our society's complicity in the roots and structure of inequality and injustice. It means, too, that as teachers we must face our own culpability in the

reproduction of inequality in our teaching, and that we must strive to develop a pedagogy equipped to provide both intellectual and moral resistance to oppression, one that extends the concept of pedagogy beyond mere transmission of knowledge and skills and the concept of morality beyond interpersonal relations.
(p. 30)

I am a teacher and as such this research may expose me to hostility because of my lesbian identity. The very fact that I am in a vulnerable position in terms of my career exposes one of the reasons that research and education must be conducted in this area. If I, as a teacher with some power within the system, am in jeopardy, to what extent does a lesbian student jeopardize herself if she attempts to be authentic? The alternative for many lesbians is to remain silent, using a feminized appearance and gender-specific school activities to hide their authentic self. Silence is a re-occurring theme throughout this study and suggests how lesbian students protect themselves, yet at the same time are oppressed. Silence acts to keep students contained, it erects walls that in turn boxes students in.

This research is a way for me to inform readers about the experience of high school lesbians. The education system has a large role in informing people of the many forms of sexual expression, reducing ignorance and fear (Gramick, 1983). One way the educational system, namely teachers and administration, can find out about teen-aged lesbians is through such research. Public education is meant to serve all members of society:

Above all, educators must commit themselves to the idea that the mission of public education is to serve all children, and that some children are gay and lesbian. To exclude these children, either by indifference or discrimination, is to

perpetuate a system that is scientifically unsound and morally unjust. (Uribe, 1994, p. 171)

Methodology

My methodology comes from a qualitative perspective. I felt it was the best way I could open the research to the reader. I want the reader to explore the experiences of the participants through their own words, but my voice is contained throughout the study. Although it has been my intent to stand back enough to allow the voices of the teen-aged lesbians to come through, I have not stood completely out of the way. I have attempted to make meaning from the stories, conscious in the fact that I am personally invested in this research and as such I may be bending or shaping their words to my own needs or perceptions. The following quote from Darwin that Wolcott (1990) placed before his monograph, "Writing up Qualitative Research" gives me some comfort:

If I lived twenty more years and was able to work, how I should have to modify the Origin, and how much the views on all points will have to be modified! Well it is a beginning, and that is something Charles Darwin to J. D. Hooker, 1860

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid
so it is better to speak remembering
we were never meant to survive

Andre Lorde, *Litany for Survival*
(as cited in hooks, 1989)

Weakness in the Current Research

Most of the research done in the area of gay and lesbian adolescents has been done on adult males recounting their experiences during adolescence from memory (Zera, 1992). These reflections run the risk of being distorted by time (Anderson, 1987). Moreover, as with most social science research the male experience has often been taken as the norm (Schneider, 1989). Adolescent lesbians are underrepresented in the literature on homosexual youth; "research on lesbian sexuality or the female homosexual is remarkable by its scarcity. Very little research has been conducted in this area . . . " (Smart, 1989, p.388). There has been a small amount of work done with lesbians and their experiences during adolescence, but most of this is either adults reflecting on their adolescence or is accessed through the use of questionnaires. In her research on lesbian identity, Cooper (1990) explains the importance of qualitative research, stating that quantitative data "have not allowed the women's experience to be quoted directly but

interpreted solely for the reader by the researcher" (p. 372). There is also a sparse amount of research looking into the issues faced by lesbian youth. Plummer (1989) had the following to say about research on adolescents: "Researchers have entered schools, hung around street corners, studied the youth services, and surveyed the work place of young, but amongst their subjects it is hard to find a single lesbian or gay voice. . ." (p. 195).

School and the Lessons Learned

There *are* lesbian students! Now this statement may seem obvious to some readers, but said in the context of family or school, it may be downright blasphemous. School is assumed to be a broad or open institution of learning; but what societal messages get transmitted in schools? Schools transmit the dominant ideology based on universalizations and stereotypes produced by the dominant structure (McLaren, 1994). School is one place where we learn both what is considered acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in public, among peers and in our institutions. For some, school is a place of autonomy from their parents, a place where they further develop social skills. It is a social circle full of intense relationships and already difficult feelings which may become exacerbated during adolescence (Harrison & Pennell, 1989). For some students, school can become a place of isolation where they must guard and hide true feelings for fear of verbal and or physical harassment.

What do students learn in schools about homosexuality (or sexuality, in general, for that matter)? Fine (1993) states, "While evidence of sexuality is everywhere within public high schools . . . official sexuality education occurs sparsely . . ." (p. 76-77). What are

the lessons learned by lesbians in a school system that is heterosexist, i.e., does not recognize sexualities other than heterosexuality? From my experience as a junior high school teacher, I see the transmission of heterosexism through the process of omission; homosexual relationships are given little or no discussion inside class. Sears (1987) explains that,

Heterosexual hegemony is present when the legitimacy of discussing homosexuality and related issues is denied, when violations of the human rights of a mostly closeted minority are ignored, and when gay and lesbian youth are deprived of relevant knowledge and information. (p. 89)

If homosexuality is discussed, it is often in a negative light. Telljohann and Price (1993) found that half of the students in their study reported that homosexuality had been discussed in class, and, of that group, 50% of the females and 37% of the males reported that it was handled negatively. Outside of class, most people often ignore verbal slurs aimed at a person's sexuality (Savin-Williams, 1990).

The education system is a place of cultural indoctrination. In the words of McLaren (1994), "the political space that education occupies today generally serves to reproduce the technocratic and corporate ideologies that characterize dominant societies" (p.1). Schools maintain the status quo and for lesbian and gay youth this means being immersed in a heterosexist environment. The pressure in schools to conform to the expectations held by the heterosexual majority is tremendous. Walling (1993) states that "violence directed at homosexuals is a major problem that has its roots in the

school peer groups" (p.11). The level of violence directed at homosexuals within schools signals an urgent need to attend to lesbian youth in a system that sometimes allows and thus supports abuse of a minority (The Governors Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth). By staying silent on the issues faced by lesbian and gay youth, we permit abuse to continue; it maintains the status quo (Brookes, 1992). Although not specifically focussing on issues faced by homosexual students, Mandel (1996) in her study of gender construction found that ". . . students unanimously believe that school would not be a safe place for gay students" (p.16).

Humans as Autonomous?

The Work of Artiface

The bonsai tree
 in the attractive pot
 could have grown eighty feet tall
 on the side of a mountain
 till split by lightening.
 But a gardener
 carefully pruned it.
 It is nine inches high.
 Every day as he
 whittles back the branches
 the gardener croons,
 It is your nature
 to be small and cozy,
 domestic and week;
 how lucky, little tree,
 to have a pot to grow in.
 With living creatures
 one must begin very early
 to dwarf their growth:
 the bound feet,
 the crippled brain,
 the hair in curlers,
 the hands you
 love to touch.

(Piercy, 1994, p. 75)

The above poem by Marge Piercy reflects for me the drive by institutions like school to have students conform to the dominant group's expectations. The idea that we as humans should be able to control ourselves, those around us and nature itself permeates Western thought. The cornerstone of 'rational' thought is the scientific process which believes in the possibility and necessity of objectivity and thinks of knowledge as the power to control. Science, for example, has been used historically to damn and ultimately 'cure' those considered deviant sexual beings. The scientific community was quick to show scientific evidence that the early suffragettes were 'failed' women and, therefore lesbians, thus discrediting their cause (Martin, 1993). The legacy by heterosexual society to control, cure or discredit homosexuals is still present today (Anderson, 1987; Plummer, 1989; Sears, 1987), yet as Mallon (1992) states the "notion of homosexuality as 'sick and deviant' is as scientifically incorrect as the flat earth theory" (p. 554). Some people may even consider sexual orientation controllable and by talking about homosexuality people will be 'recruited' into the 'life style' (Gramick, 1983). There is a growing body of evidence that suggests sexuality is not controllable in that a conscious choice is not made to be homosexual or heterosexual (Malyon, 1981; Martin, 1982; Uribe, 1994).

Heterosexuality is entrenched in the practices and everyday activities of school. Schools are a microcosm whereby the individuals within are linked through various relationships; "Mead's theory of self emphasizes the way in which identity depends upon the explicit and implicit attitudes and demands of others" (cited in

Malhotra, 1988, p. 83). An example of this is my own growing up experience as a lesbian where my definition of self was constituted in relation to those around me who were seen as sexually normal, both by myself and society. This point of reference, the dominant group, created confusion for me and it interfered with my acceptance of my sexuality. I thought that somehow I was the failure since I could not conform to society's expectations, which were in effect constantly questioning my identity. Butler (1990) explains how gender nonconformity calls into question the notion of the person:

. . . the "coherence" and "continuity" of "the person" are not logical or analytic features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility. In as much as "identity" is assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality, the very notion of "the person" is called into question by the culture emergence of those "incoherent" or "discontinuous" gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined. (p. 17)

Gender

What is important is to develop a society free of barriers and discrimination, one that allows females and males to freely choose, to meet their expectations, and to realize their potential. (Santrock, 1996, p. 352)

Gender refers to a classification of characteristics (i.e., masculine and feminine) that roughly correspond both to the two sexes and, interestingly, to sexlessness. When a child is named girl or boy this naming sets a boundary and also sets into motion the "repeated inculcation of a norm" (Butler, 1990, p. 8). Gender roles are socially constructed and culturally transmitted (Keller, 1985)

through daily practices. Harrison & Pennell (1989) state that a ". . . significant part of the establishment of masculine and feminine sex roles result from a learning process . . ." (p. 28). During adolescence there is an increasing self-awareness around gender. Adolescence is a key period in gender development; Santrock (1996) writes that few aspects of adolescent ". . . development are more central to their identity and to their social relationships than gender" (p. 353). Our society has assigned gender roles in which a set of expectations prescribe how females and males should behave has its basis in heterosexuality. Butler (1990) states, "The heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between 'feminine' and 'masculine' where these are understood as experience attributes of 'male' and 'female'" (p. 17). The general beliefs about gender specific behaviours are pervasive in our society, and they lead to the development of stereotypes. Schools are complicit in rewarding and punishing behaviours related to gender transgression (Mandel, 1996). Through the policing of masculinities and femininities, heterosexual relationships are reinforced (Epstein & Johnson, 1994, p.205). Gibson (1994) states the following about school and its role in perpetuating gender roles:

Nowhere are these harshly negative attitudes toward homosexuality more pronounced than in junior high school. These institutions are the brutal training grounds where traditional social roles are rigidly reinforced. Boys are going to play sports and drink beer with the guys. Girls are going to start paying more attention to their physical appearance in the hopes of attracting boys. Adolescence will be the last stronghold of these stereotyped roles and behaviours because

young people are looking for identity. Homosexuality and gender nonconformity are threats to many youth and an easy target for their fears and anxiety about being "normal. (p. 28)

The gender intensification hypothesis described by Santrock (1996) shows adolescence to be a crucial time in gender development. During adolescence, behavioural and psychological differences between girls and boys become increased due to society's pressures for conformity to traditional feminine and masculine gender roles (Santrock, 1996). Early adolescence is a transitional point due not only to puberty but also to the expanding cognitive abilities that cause adolescents to be acutely aware of the way in which they appear to others. There is a great deal of stress associated with these changes. Santrock (1996) explains that adolescents often become more conservative and traditional in regard to gender in order to cope with this stress.

In Santrock's (1996) work on adolescence, he draws upon a wide array of literature to describe the various influences upon gender - biological, anatomical, social and cognitive:

1. Biology: The onset of puberty marks a number of biological influences in the adolescent. During puberty there is an incorporation of sexuality into gender which, in turn, is renegotiated at this time;
2. Anatomy: Freud and Erikson followed the 'anatomy is destiny' route, whereby, gender and sexual behaviour are unlearned and instinctual;
3. Social: Social influences in our culture are both explicit and implicit. Adults and peers reward appropriate behaviour and punish

inappropriate behaviour. According to social learning theory, children grow up observing and imitating gender behaviour. This theory further states that rewards and punishment fashion gender appropriate behaviour;

4. Cognition: Two theories, cognitive development theory and gender schema theory, fall under this title with both finding support in the research. The cognitive development theory of gender states that children's gender-typing occurs once they have developed a concept of gender; they organize their world on the basis of gender. In the gender schema theory, individuals are internally motivated to conform to society's gender standards and organize their world in terms of male and female.

Traditional beliefs that may require more restrictive gender roles may make a homosexual youth's position even more difficult! Students who either step outside or do not neatly fit into the gender categories reproduced by the dominant culture can become targets for harassment. These so-called "gender outlaws" have comments such as "queer", "fag" or "dyke" directed at them irregardless of their sexual identity. Gender conformity is a strong form of social control (Bordo, 1989). Gender characteristics are intimately tied to the definition of man and women. Society has established the genders of feminine and masculine in a binary relationship that is based on heterosexual desire (Butler, 1990). A lesbian must negotiate these gender boundaries, redefining her relationship with male and female peers. Gender is key to this discussion, since in our society there are gender categories complete with characteristics that become very proscriptive in our schools. Bell, Weinberg & Hammersmith (1981)

state that homosexuality raises the issue of gender identity; questioning what it means to be a man or a woman, they write:

Society must ask itself if its survival depends on a rigid conformity to gender roles and characteristics. Parents must question a set of values that too often include an insistence that their children be just like themselves. Among other things, homosexuality forces all of us to examine our ability to tolerate, indeed appreciate, diversity in gender identifications. As long as parents are unable to accept gender nonconformity in their children, and as long as institutional policies of various kinds reflect unkind preoccupations with stereotypical notions of what males and females are required to be, nonconformists will continue to suffer painful consequences both as they grow up and throughout adulthood. The cost of rigid dichotomies in this area are incalculable. (pp. 221-222)

Sexuality

Sexuality is experienced during adolescence as dating relationships are intensified. Homosexual adolescents have added stress with their self-recognition of their homosexuality and its stigmatization and disdain by society. Martin (1982) states that,

. . . young homosexually oriented persons are faced with the growing awareness that they may be among the most despised. They are forced to deal with the possibility that part of their actual social identity contradicts most of the other social identities to which they have believed they are entitled. (p. 57)

Homosexual adolescents feel a strong sense of difference due to the conflict between the gender role/identity expected by family and society compared to their sense of gender (Hunter & Schaefer, 1987). The stress and turmoil involved in the initial coming-out period is difficult for a significant number of lesbian and gay adolescents (Hunter & Schaefer, 1987).

The discussion cannot stand solely in the gender arena. The deconstruction of sexuality within the school system, must also be part of the analysis along with gender. Fine (1993), in her study analyzing numerous sex education curricula in the United States tackles the issue of sexuality in schools. The four major discourses of female sexuality in today's public schools among students, teachers and within the curricula are sexuality as violence, sexuality as victimization, sexuality as individual morality and the fourth, often only a whisper, sexuality as desire (Fine, 1993). Fine (1993) found that public schools have not taken up the task of analysing issues around sexuality stating the following:

Within today's standard sex education curricula and many public school classrooms, we find: (1) the authorized suppression of a discourse of female sexual desire; (2) the promotion of a discourse of female sexual victimization; and (3) the explicit privileging of married heterosexuality over other practices of sexuality. (p. 75)

Mandel (1996) in her study looking at gender identity in a junior high school setting, found that ". . . lesbians rarely surfaced in interviews. Emphasis (was) largely focussed on male sexuality, not female sexuality" (p.13). Discussions around sexuality are critical in the lives of many lesbian and gay youth alike. Snider (1996) states,

The difficulties lesbian and gay youth experience as they claim their identities cannot be ignored, no matter how taboo confronting youth sexuality may be. As Canadian lesbian and gay organizations claim, the continuing high rates of suicide, homelessness, substance abuse, HIV infection, and alienation among these youth mandate immediate action. (p.295)

Difference

Lesbians and gays know they are different from their peers; they gain sensitivity to these differences by comparing themselves to others (Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993). Awareness of differences can start at a very young age (Lewis, 1984). Society, which is reflected back in the hallways and classrooms of our schools, does not extend acceptance to same sex attractions. If adolescents express same-sex attractions, this attraction is often dismissed as a "phase" they will grow out of (Heron, 1994; Lewis, 1984; Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993) or something the youth could not possibly know for sure (Mercier & Berger, 1989). The lesbian adolescent may experience shame, guilt, anxiety and denial during this period which in turn can be compounded by expectations of the family to conform to gender roles. A quote from Betty Berzon, who was aware of her lesbian identity during her adolescence, describes her feelings at such a time:

I felt . . . the loneliness of alienation from the true self, as if deep in one's centre there is a truth pleading for acknowledgement but lost in denial and dread of exposure to the unknown. Risking the acknowledgement of my gay feelings, the expression, the being known for what is true and so long denied, had been terrifying for me. (cited in Lewis, 1984, p. 265)

Sexual Orientation

Today sexual orientation (in informed circles) is seen as a continuum from exclusively heterosexual to exclusively homosexual. Studies have shown that about 4% of males and 3% of females are exclusively homosexual (Santrock, 1996). Homosexuality is a normal variation in both sexual orientation and sexual behaviour (Bell,

Weinberg and Hammersmith, 1981; Martin, 1982; Santrock, 1996). But those slight differences can make a huge difference, as the homosexual adolescent must adjust to a socially stigmatized role. Hetrick & Martin (1987) describe the many problems faced by homosexual youth but focus on isolation as a major area of concern. The isolation can be social, emotional and cognitive. Research paper after paper describe the various causes of such isolation yet very few look at the positive aspects of growing up lesbian or gay. Friend (1993) makes the suggestion that ". . . it is as likely that within this context of oppressive silencing, lesbian and gay students develop strong sources of inner strength and a healthy sense of self and excel academically and socially" (p. 220).

Personal Fear

From my personal experience as both a lesbian adolescent and a teacher, I know the fear of being labeled homosexual. This fear was heightened since I found myself repressed and marginalized by the dominant discourse within schools. I wasted a great amount of energy during my adolescence to keep my sexuality hidden; I even denied it from myself! How did the values of a system that oppressed me take up residence in my mind (Bartky, 1990)? Young (cited in McLaren, 1994) refers to a phenomenon called a "double consciousness", whereby the minority group sees itself through the eyes of the oppressor. Young's meaning of this term is illuminated in the following quotation:

The dominant culture's stereotyped, marked and inferiorized images of the group must be internalized by group members at least to the degree that they are forced to react to behaviours of others that express or are influenced by those images. . .

. This consciousness is double because the oppressed subject refuses to coincide with these devalued, objectified, stereotyped visions of herself or himself. The subject desires recognition as human, capable of activity, full of hope and possibility, but receives from the dominant culture only the judgement that he or she is different, marked, or inferior. (Young cited in McLaren, 1994, p. 20)

Role Models

The lesbian youth does not have role models like her heterosexual peers (Cooper,1990). One of the most obvious and important locations for role models is the family, but homosexual youth ". . . do not have a group identity from birth, and therefore, the family does not provide the first role model and support system" (Margolies, Becker & Jackson-Brewer, 1987, p.230). There is no sense of us versus them as in other minority groups. The lesbian adolescent cannot ask heterosexual parents to help them learn coping mechanisms to combat and protect them from a hostile world. The media, the church, parents, friends and the school system actively validate relationships between a man and a woman. School is a place one learns to socialize based on the dominant practices in society. Many people take it for granted that students are socialized in their peer group for such activities as dating. The homosexual youth does not have the opportunity to date in the way that their heterosexual peer group does. A lesbian's relationship with peers may be one of isolation, since her acceptance is often based on a lie (Margolies, Becker & Jackson-Brewer, 1987). The following quote reflects such a predicament:

Socialization for young lesbians is atypical in many respects. They may "date" heterosexually in response to peer pressure and in an attempt to fit in. Confused,

conflicted youngsters may engage in promiscuous heterosexual behaviour to try to make themselves straight, or to make absolutely sure that they really are lesbians (Schneider & Tremble, 1985). . . . Those who are involved in an intimate same-sex relationship must keep it secret. Thus, lesbian adolescents have little opportunity to date, develop intimate same-sex relationships, or experiment sexually in the safe, socially sanctioned context in which heterosexual youngsters develop their social awareness. "At a time when heterosexual adolescents are learning how to socialize, young gay people are learning how to hide" (Hetrick & Martin, 1984, p.6). (Schneider, 1989, p.117)

Homophobia

Stigmatization of the gay adolescent has evolved from centuries of misinformation and fear. Education through direct teaching and the example of role models will be the best way to attack discrimination at its root. (Martin, 1982, p.63)

The first thing we do to destroy another human being is verbal. I destroy you by calling you things that take your personhood away from you. And then I may or may not do [physical] violence. (Betty Green cited in Alvine, 1994, p. 6)

Homophobia (i.e., irrational fear, hatred and intolerance of homosexuals) produces a life and death situation! Educators, particularly, must become sensitive to their own homophobia as well as to expressions of homophobia from students. Homophobic remarks and violence based on fear of homosexuality need to be stopped. A study by the National Gay Task Force in the United States found that, out of 2100 homosexuals surveyed (male and female), 20% of the females and 50 % of the males reported being harassed,

threatened or physically abused in junior or senior high school because of their sexual orientation (Sears, 1987). Gibson (1994) states the "verbal and physical attacks against gay youth have increased in recent years This abuse begins as early as late elementary school, becomes pronounced in junior high school and continues into high school" (p. 45). Gay and lesbian teens account for approximately 20-30% of all attempted suicides (Remafedi, 1994). The school system is not meeting the needs of homosexual youth; in addition to the tragedy of suicide, schools foster homophobia by ignoring it, often "deny(ing) access to positive information about homosexuality that could improve the self-esteem of gay youth" (Gibson, 1994, p. 46).

In a world which tells lesbian youngsters that they are criminals, sinners, or mentally ill, self-esteem becomes a major issue. Until gay-positive feelings emerge, lesbian youngsters have difficulty feeling good about anything they do in school, at home, or in social situations. (Schneider, 1989, p. 116)

Chapter III

Method

Personal Experience and Methodologies

I have used my experience as a lesbian student and teacher both as a spring board and as a touchstone for this research. Harding (1987) suggests that "the best feminist analysis . . . insists that the inquirer her/himself be placed in the same critical plane as the overt subject matter, thereby recovering the entire research for scrutiny in the results of research" (p. 9). Occasionally my experience will be put forth for examination, allowing my personal example and the personal examples of students immersed in school as a connection point for others (hooks, 1988). The following quote from hooks (1988) reflects my desire with this 're-search':

There is much exciting work to be done when we use confession and memory as a way to theorize experience, to deepen our awareness, as part of the process of radical politicization. Often we experience pleasure and joy when we share personal stories, closeness, intimacy. This is why the personal has had such a place in feminist discourse. To reaffirm the power of the personal while simultaneously not getting trapped in identity politics, we must work to link personal narratives with knowledge of how we must act politically to change and transform the world. (pp.110-111)

The possibility I see in this methodology is the possibility to emancipate myself and others (Frye, 1990) since knowledge becomes a form of resistance. I wanted their voices to describe their own situations and thoughts. My voice is the voice of time past, of reflective thought; the voice of the students is a voice of the

present and, therefore, closely linked to the lived experience. Hutchinson & Wilson (1994) state, "When we listen to other's stories . . . we learn about people's lives in their own terms. We do not anticipate the categories into which experience and meaning will some how neatly fit" (p. 301).

Many homosexual youth are constantly on guard, hiding their true sexuality and are thus often left with a sense of isolation (Telljohann & Price,1993); this profoundly affects their high school experience. My research seeks to give the interviewees an avenue to explain their dreams, needs, problems, and successes to the institutions that systemically deny supportive dialogue around their sexuality. Feminism keeps me grounded in the female experience, whereby I am doing research for women not on women. This has also been a healing journey for myself; I want to regain the self I have kept hidden for so long.

Reflexive Statement

I am a lesbian! I wonder what is going through your mind after reading these four small words: are you thinking, why did she have to say this? So what? I don't go around telling everyone my sexuality. Do not get me wrong; this by no means is the beginning and end of my identity, but it is vital to the success of this research. I have focussed on the experiences of lesbian adolescents within the structure of high school. Reinharz (1992) states that "for a women to be understood in a social research project, it may be necessary for her to be interviewed by a woman" (p. 23). Now that I have said this, I do not want to set up an insider/outsider dichotomy. A person does not have to be lesbian to study lesbian issues; however, it may

be easier to gain participant trust. The fact that I identify as a lesbian may be both an advantage and disadvantage in this research. I have had the difficult and profound experience of attending and hiding in school both as a student and then as a teacher.

I come to this research housing a certain set of biases based both on my history and on my personal experience. My particular view of the world is greatly affected by who I am; and who I am is part of my lesbian identity. By including my subjectivity in this research, I hope to increase "objectivity". Harding (1991) uses the term "strong objectivity" to move outside the dominant modes of "rationality"; she writes:

Research is socially situated, and it can be more objectively conducted without aiming for or claiming to be value-free. The requirements for achieving strong objectivity permit one to abandon notions of perfect, mirrorlike representations of the world, the self as a defended fortress, and the "truly scientific" as disinterested with regard to morals and politics, yet still apply rational standards to sorting less from more partial and distorted belief. Indeed, my argument is that these standards are more rational and more effective at producing maximally objective results than the ones associated with what I have called weak objectivity. (p. 159)

When I came back to the university to do research, my original topic for my M.A. thesis was grounded in my experience as a female science teacher in a male dominated arena. Initially I planned to explore the ways in which females are marginalized both by the material and by the pedagogy of the science classroom (Keller,1985). Science has played a large part in my education. I have a science degree, have briefly worked in the scientific field and have spent

four years teaching science in a junior high school. I was, and still am, interested in the question of gender and science; however, I now find myself at a place more foundational to who I am. I have personal experience and a deeply rooted passion that was missing with my original topic. My passion exposes the fact that I will not be an objective researcher; therefore, following the tenets of "good" feminist research, I will work throughout this process to expose my biases (Bristow & Esper, 1988). I have included journal entries to help flesh out my biases, assumptions and experiences.

Interviews

I interviewed four lesbians between the ages of 18 - 20 years old. Their names have been changed. Names that were used in the interviews have been left blank in the transcripts. The youngest participant (18 years old) was attending grade twelve during both the interviews; her pseudonym is April. April was my main participant and provided the greatest amount of substance informing this project. Pat (19 years old) was attending the final year of a college system where the students ranged in age from 15-21; her grade eleven year was spent in public school, grade twelve and the subsequent year were spent at the college. Brenda (19 years old) had been out of high school approximately six months when I interviewed her. Vicky (20 years old) had returned to her old high school after graduating for upgrading. I interviewed her approximately ten months after completing her upgrading.

The interviews took place in locations comfortable and convenient to the participants. All interviews were taped and later transcribed verbatim. The information letter and consent forms

given to the participants can be found in Appendix A, B and C. Grammatical errors were corrected in order to aid understanding; however, a concerted effort was made to keep the excerpts identical to the original transcripts. The interviews lasted from 30 minutes to 90 minutes. Attempts were made to obtain feed-back on the first interview from the participants, but only one participant was able to be interviewed a second time. Similar themes were covered with each participant. There was no script followed for each interview; the participant was able to determine the direction of the interview when a topic she wanted to discuss arose. I made a concerted effort to keep the interviews dynamic so they were more like a conversation than a formal interview. Oakley (1981) provides a framework for interviews whereby they remained open and interactive. She and others (Bell, 1991; DeVault, 1990) found that successful interviews adopted a collaborative approach which included the personal involvement of the interviewer. Collaboration is fostered when interviews are interactive (more like conversations than interrogation); the interview, for example, entails self-disclosure of the researcher when asked (Bell, 1991; Lather, 1988; Reinharz, 1992). I responded to any questions the participants asked. They were all aware that I was a lesbian and a teacher.

With my personal experience, I was an informed listener, able to respond on a deeper level than one who has learned about the topic through reading the relevant literature. I listened for not only what was said, but also what was not said, attending to the pauses as well as the words. Interviews are enhanced by the personal

experiences of the researcher, since these can serve as resources for a "deeper" listening (De Vault, 1987).

I located the four participants in a variety of ways. I contacted two of the young lesbians through gay and lesbian groups, one through friends and the other through a workshop I presented. I had attempted to locate participants through a notice (see Appendix D for the notice) in two senior high schools from the middle of May through the end of June, but received no inquiries. I applied to two school districts requesting permission to place a notice with the school counsellors. One district refused, while the other consented (see Appendix E for the cover letter and Appendix F for the research outline). Consent was dependant on minor changes to the notice and consent forms that would clearly state the project was through the University of Victoria and not the School District (see Appendix G for School District consent form). My response to the letters can be found in Chapter IV.

A limiting factor to the participation of lesbian students was the parental consent form required by the university regulations. Few lesbians are able to come out to their parents during their high school years and fewer still would have parents willing to sign consent forms. Three of the participants I interviewed had friends who attended high school that identified themselves as lesbian but were not out to their parents, or if they were, they were not willing to ask them to sign a consent form. The fact that many young lesbians are not "out" to their parents is one of the main reasons the lesbians in this study were in the latter years of adolescents.

I will not pretend that this limited look at the experiences of four lesbians can lead to far reaching generalizations. Any generalizations that can be made are of a limited nature. It is a study set at a particular moment in time. The interviews were conducted by a very inexperienced interviewer but experienced conversationalist. All four of the participants were white and able-bodied. I feel that the intersection of race, lesbianism and the school system needs to be addressed but this is beyond the scope of this paper (refer to Snider, 1996).

Chapter IV

The Interviews

Silences

Journal Entry, Silences

I am interested in the variety of ways a voice can be silenced. I have kept coming back to this personally. I feel that throughout my high school experience I could not be myself. I was an imposter, a fraud. Signals from the structure of school and society from parents and friends reinforced heterosexuality to the extent that homosexuality was villainized. What does it mean to "not be yourself" for a lesbian youth? Can we ever get to that elusive self? Maybe I am talking about degrees?

Silence is Deafening

Be silent you're a women.
 Be silent you're a mother.
 Be silent you're a lesbian, a migrant women, disabled, working class.
 Be silent you're black.
 Be silent you're not black enough.
 Be silent, we don't want to hear your story. You don't count. You're not important. Your story doesn't count.
 Be silent you're Aboriginal.
 Be silent you're not.

As I said silence is deafening, it makes us sick, it makes us powerless and so we speak too- to break the silences amongst us as women.

(M. McCormack cited in Bee, 1993 p. 125)

Silence in Schools. Self regulation, watching what you say, how you act is common for many youth, but for young lesbians it may even be a greater factor in their outside behaviour. Appearances are important in a gendered society. Teen-aged lesbians may have a heightened sense of their appearance since they do not want to suggest to the outside world that they are lesbian. There is a great

amount at stake for lesbian youth trying to be part of a school system, and society that could reject them for who they are.

April:

I hate it, like not being able to say, because I want to but you feel like you're so closed in you can't say anything. It feels like you are in a box and I just want to get out and be myself. Like it is so hard if you do anything, oh they might say something, they might do something, might say something. Ahhhhh! And might like you know? So it's really hard, what you talk about and the things that you do and they might think something you know, but, um I don't know, it is difficult.

In the above passage April talks about being in a box since other students in school might start to talk about her as being a lesbian if she does not behave a certain way. She cannot say that she is a lesbian for fear of their reactions. The box in this case can also be seen as protection from outsider reactions but it can also lead to depression and feelings of guilt. Imagine feeling that one cannot tell even a close friend a fundamental aspect of who you are at a time when sexuality is a large part of being. Gilligan (1993) lists five "psychological truths" in her paper titled, "Joining the resistance: Psychology, Politics, Girls and Women". The first three points are reflected throughout the interview excerpts:

1. What is unvoiced or unspoken, because it is out of relationship, tends to get out of perspective and to dominate psychic life. 2. The hallmarks of loss are idealized and rage, and under the rage, immense sadness. . . . 3. What is dissociated or repressed -- known and then not known -- tends to return, return, and return.

(p.148)

As Gilligan (1993) explains in looking at her interview data The use of "I don't know" suggests that the youth is ". . . struggling explicitly with a reluctance to know what she knows and an inclination to

suppress her knowledge and go along with the group" (p.151). This attempt to suppress what one knows is a common theme in the voices of these young lesbians. I tried, throughout my adolescence to suppress what I knew and as such it kept returning and returning dominating my psychic life until I began to talk. In speaking these young women are opening up an avenue to themselves that has long been closed to the outside world. In the following quote April voices her strong desire to be herself. She realizes that in her current environment she doesn't have the freedom to be herself.

April:

I can't wait to get out of school cause then I can move and I can go and be a different person. Like be who I really am, in a different place. I wish I could do that. That's why I like coming up here cause I don't really care who knows me and who finds out. I hardly ever see them. I live somewhere else. (Laughter) You know, no one knows me. . . . Kind of like your private life outside your real life. Nobody knows me like this.

Structural Silences. Friere (1982) speaks to the importance of dialogue since ". . . if it is in speaking their word that men, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way which men achieve significance as men. Dialogue is thus an existential necessity" (p. 77).

Many youth and adults take it for granted that one can gossip in school about crushes and attractions with friends. That role models for dating are ever present and unquestioned. Heterosexual peers are supported by the discourse in schools; it is simply taken for granted that heterosexuality is normal and does not need to be defended. Not so for lesbians. The next passage from April shows the difficulty involved in speaking about homosexuality. This passage is also

interesting for the way in which April has placed homosexuality outside of herself.

April: Some like the English teacher, she was all fine about it . . . she'll talk to you. And people say like, "Oh ya, I think they are what ever." And she'll say, "Why do you think that?" And she'll want to know why and they'll be, "Um, um, um, just because they are." She'll say, "Actually they 're not." She stands up for their rights. She is not herself. She is straight and everything, but she supports it and she'll stand up for the rights and say, "Well actually they are just as normal as you are." And she'll start talking about -- and she has a great way of explaining everything, I just love it . And the person will go "Okay, I'll (unintelligible words)." I think it is great, there is nothing wrong with it. If people wouldn't have this fixed thing in their head. Where they learned it from I don't know?

Researcher: That is a good question, where did they learn it? Is it parents? School? Society?

April: They are just so scared of getting put down because every one puts me down if I talk about it. If you state that you support you are put down no matter what, if you are or not. And I really think that if you are talked to when you are younger, and it was just part of your normal life and every thing would be fine. Like if you are a little kid and you're with gay parents and everything and you see it all the time. You see other people, the other people the other way and I bet you they are great people because they accept it. You know they grew up, "Oh my parents are gay, well okay! You go out with a guy so whatever." They won't care.

Researcher: It's getting to that point where people are willing to talk about --

April: Oh! I know.

Researcher: -- homosexuality in school.

April: Everyone is just so scared about it, "Oh Ya, they caused AIDS." But it is not all people it is only some, like the really ignorant people. They have a negative view about everything People like that make the world so hard.

Researcher: And often times they are the loudest people.

April: Oh! Ya!

Dialogue is often shut down since taking a positive stance toward homosexuality is hotly contested and comes with severe consequences such as labelling, name calling and being ostracized. An example of what a discussion can do to change people's attitudes which was the classroom discussion that April describes from her

English class on women's rights. Some of the guys in the class had very sexist and stereotypical views about women but after the teacher allowed the dialogue to proceed some of the males may have changed or opened up their thinking.

Researcher: Did teachers ever say that so and so made a contribution to society?

April: It will help because when people say they are bad people, "Why are they bad, tell me what have they done bad? Have they hurt you? Have they said something that is bad? What is so bad about them?" You say that to them and it is uhhh! I wish we could talk about it more because I -- we didn't start talking about gays and lesbians but in socials we started talking about women's rights. And the men are like always more superior and women are allowed to vote and stuff. And we start having a big issue and some guys are, "Women are supposed to stay home and clean house and they are not allowed to do anything and they can't make the money; that is the man's job." And I am like, "No it is not, women work. You know they can handle more pain. Why do you think they can have the babies?" (Laughter) And we had that about women's issues and I was right up there going. And I had some good points and some of the guys are like, "Okay, women are okay now." After you talk with them they are like, "Uh, okay!" Some of the guys are, some of the other guys can't handle it. Like the big macho guys but they are the guys that are too immature to accept it yet. They really do probably in the back of their minds, but.

Classroom Silences. When April was asked if homosexuality was discussed in sex education class the following exchange took place:

April: Oh grade, I think ten or eleven, we had a sex ed class and they totally shy away from it; they wouldn't even talk about. Like that is what I really noticed cause in biology they were talking about sex organs (unintelligible words) and everything, and how a baby is made and they showed us a film and they go, "Oh! We'll stop it here, they start talking about gay people." And I am just like?

Researcher: And they stopped the video?

April: It is a part of life it is out there and they are like sheltering us from it. Like we won't talk about it. We won't even say a word about it, and "The next thing on our agenda!" And when I totally noticed and I get so mad, I get so mad at teachers. Why do they have to do that? It is just, uhh! It annoys me and sometimes I just feel like going up, like I don't care, and talking to teachers. I'll go up there and say what I have to say, when everyone has gone (laughter), of course.

Researcher: How do they react to that?

April: They don't care.

Researcher: Do they ever apologize and say why they aren't talking about?

April Well they say, "Ya, we don't want to cause a big scene with everyone." And people say bad things and cause a big uproar for them, they want to keep it low profile. (unintelligible) They don't want to cause a big thing just the normal stuff and I'm like it is normal, maybe not for you but for other people it is, you know.

Researcher: They don't see that?

April: They don't see that at all.

Why do some teachers shut down dialogue? There can be many reasons: uncomfortable with the subject, fear of the reactions from others, ignorance, presumption that everyone is heterosexual, etc. During this part of the discussion the frustration on the part of the participant was clear. And why shouldn't she be frustrated when every avenue for affirmation is being closed by people in positions of authority. April raises an extremely important point, that is, the issue of normalcy. In the context of today's society what does this mean? Schools seem to have a very narrow view of what is normal in terms of sexuality. The message is that normal is definitely not gay or lesbian; perpetuation of this myth is ensured through the denial of accurate information but most often it is maintained by silence.

What signals are received by queer youth in a classroom where this silencing takes place? Homosexuality is something that can't be talked about, something the teacher will ignore, and in effect, sanction verbal harassment, fear and prejudice.

Researcher: So how was it, what about in school, in the hallways or in the classroom, any discussions about , um?

Brenda: I don't remember a whole lot of discussion in class at all like in Health class or anything like that at all. Except, I remember that sexual orientation that was always homosexual orientation everything else was heterosexual and sexual orientation meant homosexual so we were the ones with the orientation and

everything else had nothing, ya I remember, I remember that word coming up. And, um, the only other problem I remember anything queer happening was, and I was lucky, I was a, um, peer helper and we had training because someone had come to one of us, it wasn't me, and they thought they might be bisexual and that put the group into this frenzy of deciding with what we should do because we never had training. So we had a lesbian, gay, bisexual youth project come in and speak to us and they came in and did one workshop and gave us books and I took the three books home and read them in one night and I don't know how people didn't realize (laugh) so that was the only thing that we had that I can remember.

The size of this school where this incident occurred was approximately two thousand students and they had no discussion about gay and lesbian issues before this crisis situation. Why? Study after study has shown that gay and lesbian youth are in a high risk category for suicide, drug and alcohol abuse and are often the targets of violence (Gibson, 1994; Hunter & Schaecher, 1987; Walling, 1993).

Speaking Out. In taking a stand on an issue a woman is quickly labelled as butch which connotes being manly. This is transgression of her gender role. By not remaining passive and accommodating, she takes back power and the mechanisms meant to keep her in her place are brought into play.

April: Cause that is also what I have to do because I am scared to stand up for my rights, like if you do then they'll be like "You are really butch, you are really whatever." I am like, "Actually no, I just don't take any crap from guys. . .". They'll say things toward you that are really rude and you want to say something back to them, they're like, "Oh! She's guts!" And I'm like, "You've got bite. Cause I don't want to take any crap from you?" You stand up for what you think, for who you are what ever and that just totally freaks the guys, Oh my god! To see a woman be so strong, it is like, "wow".

Access to Information. For the lesbian youth speaking below libraries are not a place they feel comfortable borrowing materials on homosexuality.

Researcher: Anything in the school library that you might consider that you could take out?

Pat: I didn't look in the library, I don't think I would have. I would have been too scared to, if people found out or have people suspect. And I wasn't sure enough in myself to go and speak to other people outside. Like I wouldn't even of known where to look, to find some sort of gay rights group even or -- I think there might be a hot line but I am not sure, but I wouldn't have known where to go and look for that kind of thing. Even if that kind of thing was made aware, and like there is a required class called career and management skills. They do the sexuality thing again and they go through the health risks and they go through how to prevent AIDS and sexual diseases. If they had taken that a step further and they talk about STD prevention for gays and lesbians, I think having that required in all the classes would have made a difference in people's attitudes, maybe.

Researcher: But they don't talk about it?

Pat: They don't talk about it at all. The reference made was that AIDS is not just a disease for homosexuals. I think that was the only time. If it were brought up in that compulsory class I think it would have been great or even to have a speaker come and sort of discuss the issue so people, so there would even be a role model or even somebody you could identify with as a picture rather than some sort of effervescent image in your mind.

It is vital that the linkage of homosexuality with disease, namely AIDS, be carefully handled if it needs to be made at all. In the minds of the youth homosexuality is now, if it wasn't already, linked with pathology. Also it seems that this linkage completely ignores lesbians and lesbian sexuality. The negative discourse around homosexuality in schools is supported by this type of association. This is particularly true since it is the only context homosexuality is discussed within sex education classes.

When asked about her school library Brenda laughed and stated,

No, there was nothing. I spent a lot of time in the library.

Researcher: Would you have been able to get something out on your topic? Would you have felt comfortable --

Brenda: No.

Researcher: -- going past the librarian?

Brenda: No, but I was always reading and I knew the librarian she was a good friend's mother, so I, I looked it up in the card catalogue but I didn't find any and I couldn't ask, so she -- Now it turns out that her daughter came out right around the time that I was struggling, so you know I could have but at the time, I didn't know. And I remember going to the public library and trying to get something out. That was really difficult.

How can youth find information when they are too frightened to even use the library? If a student does manage to find a book on gays and lesbians how do they then take that book to a flesh and blood librarian to sign it out? (It would be interesting to know the rate at which such books go missing from libraries.) School are a place of silence, where there is no positive information freely available to gay and lesbian youth.

April explains how she found out about a gay and lesbian youth group in her area. She starts by explaining that her school did not have any information on such support groups:

April: No they never said anything about this.

Researcher: Posters?

April: No, Maybe it is just my school, I don't know. Ya because _____ (youth group) says we should have posters in your counsellor's office, I went in there, "Where is the _____ (youth group) poster?" _____ (youth group), what is _____ (youth group)?"- I'm like, "Never mind, see you later." They don't know about anything, but I found out about it because I went to a few counsellors and I was talking to them.

Researcher: Through school?

April: No outside of school. I went there and talked to a lady, and, um I was looking through the phone book for it and I saw _____ (youth group) and I phoned it up to find out what it was, cause I was like, I always think I have been like this, but who do you ask? . . . I didn't know where to find it. Who to ask? Where to look? So I was just looking through the phone book, saw this, phoned the line, found out, then found out where it was and came here (to the youth group meeting).

Gender

Difference.

Brenda:

I remember in grade six going to a sleep over and never understanding the fuss over boys.(laugh) And I remember at the time feeling incredibly different from the people around me, and just thinking I was a late bloomer. . . . And then in grade eight, okay I happened to notice that crush you have on that woman . . . or that's a crush you have on her, but I couldn't put a finger on it.

The feeling of difference. In this case it is a difference that goes unnamed, not knowing what the 'label' is or should be. Many teenagers do not have the discourse available to them to start a conversation about homosexuality. All their friends are talking about boys, excited about members of the opposite sex and it is taken for granted that everyone feels this way because it is "natural". Just 'a late bloomer'. How many lesbians have thought or heard this statement? One day she'll wake up and she'll be just like every other friend of hers, like the people in the movies on TV and in every book you read (unless of course you were lucky enough to get your hands on a copy of Ruby Fruit Jungle). So some play a role:

Pat: I would keep pretty conscious of the way I behaved because I knew it was different.

Researcher: So you would watch what you would say?

Pat: I'd watch what I said, I would be very quiet, I'd be very shy; I'd be, well, I was very shy, I wasn't as sociable and outgoing and I wasn't very good with people, just because I was very hold back, I didn't have a very large social web that most people were supposed to develop, I had my friends, a close set of friends, and a few people I would say "hi" to in the hallway.

Later in the interview Pat explained further why she wasn't able to be herself:

Cause I couldn't follow the stereotypical role of a high school girl, also it didn't help that I was a nerd either.

Researcher: No, being smart is not really that good for a girl, is it?

Participant: No, no it isn't, even guys, they're really not supposed to be into marks, they are supposed to be cool. If you are athletic it is great I think that if there had been some sort of group that came together, if there had been some sort of community in the school, if there were a couple of people 'out' that you could sort of approach and there was a way of approaching them without um it being obvious, "Oh! So and so is going to talk to that person who is queer." I think that would have made it a lot easier, if there had been a lot more awareness, I mean all I really understood at that point of being lesbian was what I had figured out on my own and I had as many prejudices as any body else would, and I was applying them against myself a lot of the times.

How does anybody escape internalizing the prejudices of society when there is no support group to flesh these out into the light for the fear and ignorance they produce and feed? The multiple intersections of being smart, female, not overly feminine, not athletic, quiet and lesbian compound each other to form multiple oppressions. The school system fails youth over and over again when they do not fit the narrow categories assigned to male and female. Difference within our schools is met with great cost as evident in the following from April:

If you are different, if you are a hippie, if you're a punk, and totally over there in your corner and no one speaks to you. And if you are (unintelligible words) you will beat me up. Like all those guys who are maybe not big macho guys maybe a bit skinnier, people call them names even if they aren't gay, they are straight. They can't help the way they are built or whatever or how they act. And people put them down and beat them up for whatever reason and they don't even know what's going on. Gay or straight or whatever. They just pick on him because he's different. And if you were different (unintelligible words) drastically different like everyone thinks it is. I would not even be able to function at school.

School communities have great potential to become sites for societal reform. Educators need to question whether their school will be a place of oppression or a place where difference is celebrated. The former appears to be the case in many schools leading to an unsafe environment for many youth that are seen as different.

What does feeling that the physical, emotional attractions to women are wrong do to one's psyche? The feeling of being different, knowing you are different since you are not dating members nor do you want to date members of the opposite sex. Making up excuses for not dating. For me there was also incredible guilt when someone of the same sex was attracted to me. This sense that what you are feeling is "wrong" is very crippling especially when there is no one to talk to about such feelings.

Through meeting and getting to know another gay person Pat realized that homosexuals are actually people; that it was indeed possible to be one. There is nothing like meeting a flesh and blood person to dispel years of myth based on ignorance and fear. The abstract homosexual was brought to life showing that homosexuality is indeed real and possible.

Pat did not have any lesbian role models and the signal she received from society was that being a lesbian was wrong. In the following quote she explains how she first realized it was possible to be homosexual:

Pat: I really didn't have much awareness (of being a lesbian) in junior high, except for the fact this is, this funny thing, something inside me must have (unintelligible words) because I really didn't like any of the guys at all, and everybody else had gone out with people except for me. And I would just think Okay I just haven't met the right guy yet and, um, but I liked my friends a lot and, um, I think subliminally or unconsciously I knew I was sort of attracted to girls I used to think if I was a guy I wouldn't mind going out with her, but I am not so I can't

Researcher: Grade eleven?

Pat: Grade ten, grade eleven. And in grade ten at the end of the year I met a guy who was gay and he wasn't very out, he talked to friends and people he felt he could trust.

Researcher: He went to your school?

Pat: He went to my school, he had been in school for quite awhile, probably equivalent to grade 12 or 13 or something. He was a really neat guy. He was a little on the weird edge of things, not just because he was gay, (skipped our joking) although he wasn't stereotypically gay, he dressed in black, slicked back hair He was the first person I met when I realized that this isn't just something that you know you hear about occasionally. That it is something that is actually real and that if it is real it might be possible that you know, what I have been feeling, what I started realizing after grade ten. I realized there is something funny going on and so I thought that it is possible to be somebody like that, that it is not just a fantasy, I don't want to go into detail about fantasy but I'd, in my dreams, I was always the guy going after the girls I always had this thing that what I was feeling was wrong, it was very wrong

Vicky did not have a great deal of awareness around her lesbianism when she attended high school for the first time. She was also not very aware of discussions about homosexuality in class:

I think they did (discuss homosexuality in sex education class) and I never really thought about it at the time, I have to admit it had crossed my mind at various points over the years but -- No just because, doesn't mean I am. And, um, basically I realized was, I said to myself, "Just because doesn't mean I am but it doesn't mean I am not." The just because I had sex with a girl younger than myself when I was twelve you know it is something I haven't really forgotten, and it propped up it my mind a every few years, every few months.

April relates that she was always aware of her lesbianism:

April: I've known basically the whole time. It sort of confused me that I haven't found the right guy or whatever but it's really, it got pretty strong when I was in grade nine, grade eight, grade nine. I was starting to notice then, and I'm like there is no way this could be a phase.

Researcher: Have you heard that from some people (i.e. homosexuality being a phase.)?

April: Well, I've heard it, like people talking about it. I thought well maybe I am in a phase. We talked about it in sex ed, going through phases, eventually they just think, "Oh you'll choose one!"

Researcher: Is that what they said in sex ed?

April: Ya. In sex ed. Well you go through a phase and you may think this or you may think that and then eventually you will chose one and I'm like, "I didn't choose? I didn't choose to be a lesbian cause it's easier."

Researcher: I can't believe that they said that in sex ed.

April: I don't know where they get it from. I'm like reading the manual. Okay. It's weird.

Mercier (1989) found that professionals (such as counsellors and social service personnel) perpetuate the myth that youth can't be sure of their sexual orientation. This is even more a case in point if a youth feels they may be homosexual. This myth leads to the fallacy that homosexual adults, or talk about homosexuality, will in turn cause youth to be drawn into the "lifestyle". Chandler (1995) in his book, Passages of Pride: Lesbian and Gay Youth Come of Age states the following:

The myth that the adult homosexual will draw teenagers into this "lifestyle" . . . is founded on the myth that a teenager's sexual orientation is still forming. However, a growing body of scientific research suggests that sexual orientation is determined long before adolescence. And by the time teenagers begin to identify themselves lesbian or gay, they are more sure than unsure about their own homosexuality. (pp. 153-154)

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The question of choice is a difficult one for people to understand. Here is where I could ridicule but I must step back and realize that my experience and the experience of the women in this study is not the same for everybody. Some women may say that their attraction to women solely exists because of some conscious choice, and I do not want to belittle that, but the concept of choice has been used to perpetuate this notion that homosexuality is a phase that some adolescents go through and eventually they will make a choice. In the words of this lesbian youth which echo my experience -- "weird". Being lesbian is not some superficial decision I made one day after some mysterious 'phase', it is a fundamental part of my

being that has been present perhaps from a very young age, perhaps at birth and is made excruciatingly difficult in a society that denies positive recognition of same sex attractions. A society that signals both explicitly and implicitly for the condemnation of homosexual desire.

Pat has recognized that the confusion around her sexuality was brought on by society's heterosexism. She used to blame herself for what she was feeling but her analysis of the situation now focuses on society and how it has backed her into this position. The question of, "What is wrong with me?" is now turned around and asked of society. The problem for Pat is no longer being a lesbian but society's complicity in creating a narrow minded atmosphere that is detrimental to homosexual youth. This hostile atmosphere is in turn based on fear and ignorance.

Pat: Well, I always felt very weird about the fact that I had never gone out with anybody --(interruption from dog)Did I say it felt very weird not -- and I was always the one left out when everybody else was dating. Um, but I really didn't know what to do about it. There was this whole lack of understanding which I still have. I am still very confused.

Researcher: Everybody is always confused. (laughter) You know, I am just wondering -- what about your for sure straight friends? Do you think they would go through the same confusion? And if not, why not, around their sexuality.

Pat: Around their sexuality? I remember some of them telling me after the fact that they had wondered about their sexuality, they had considered it. And talking to some other people before and after this homosexuality discussion they said -- We had done a survey of (what) people's attitudes were (referring to a campus survey she helped conduct), and one of . . . the questions was, "Have you ever considered the possibility that you may be homosexual gay, lesbian whatever?" And fifty percent of them said yes. And the majority of our, the people who answered were Canadian. And I think that is very true talking to some of my friends, but I don't think they had the same amount of confusion that I did because in the end when they did go out with guys or girls, as the case may be, they were following the norm. So it was a sigh of relief when they did so. Where if I ever manage to go out with this girl at the college, you know, it would be the other way around. It would be another kind of tension. I know they didn't spend a year sitting on, spending large amounts of time sitting on a hill thinking, "What the hell? What the hell is wrong with me"?

Role Models and Gender Roles. Pat states in the following quote that being female meant that there was pressure to make oneself attractive to males:

I think a guy needs to be rowdy and laughing, always having to come up with a witty jokes of some sort, um the guys had to be popular with all the guys and the girls, the girls just had to be popular with the girls. Like you are supposed to try and be attractive for guys. Ya, although I have never actually fit into a gender role, I just sort of followed my own little individual path. I see my friends starting to say, okay, maybe the make-up is a wise idea.

April discusses the importance of appearances below. She relates the stereotypical view of male and female and how she doesn't fit these stereotypes. Appearances are of great importance in high school, the fact that some girls go to damaging lengths to look a certain way is a serious indictment of society's pressure to look a certain way.

Being a girl, ya could be a little bopper type, little short skirts and the half top and the curly hair and tonnes of make-up and I'm just like -- "Oh! I don't fall into that role. Does that mean I am different?" (laughter) And the guys have to be these big muscle guys, the big thing right now is steroids. Like the guys don't mature until they are older and they are all like tall tall frames and nothing on them. (Laughter) It is hilarious. But they can't do anything about it, they'll fill out when they are older, but they want to be all big and strong for their girls.

Vicky describes her notions of what it meant to be lesbian in the absence of role models:

Vicky: When I came out I went totally butch, shaved my head and totally denied any feminine part of myself and I was partly rebelling not just against heterosexism, but against everything that they said I had to be as woman.

Researcher: Was part of that -- As a woman you need to find a man and be attractive to a man, settle down get married and have kids? Did you get those signals at all in school?

Vicky: I did, but not constantly, and not completely, you know I could do what I wanted. I have always felt like I could do what I wanted which has been really good

but I kind of wanted that for a long time; to get married have kids and settle down, be a wife and in some ways I would still like that, sit at home and write all day and watch my kids. It is just different because here I am single, or have lovers or I have a wife.

Researcher: I am wondering how one rationalizes and defines oneself being a women and having to be feminine and then also if you identify yourself as lesbian. Does that mean you can no longer be feminine?

Vicky: Yup, when I came out I didn't think that but I wanted to be everything I thought I shouldn't be, even if I didn't think that that's what I was. I didn't realize that, I think I must have had an image of lesbian being butch, you know all of them being butch and I knew that wasn't true because I was educated and aware of homosexual people. And over the last few months, being with the person I am with now who is very femme, it has been really good for me because it has reminded me like, yes I am -- Yes I do like make-up. I do like dresses. I do like lace and all these things. I still like some of the other things but it made me feel I could do that again.

Does the above passage suggest that the female gender role not only represents gender but heterosexual sexuality? Copper (1990) found that her 15 respondents rejected traditional femininity since it also represented heterosexuality for them. The resistant voice rings loud in the above passage. The strength and courage she showed in turning away from what others told her to be is phenomenal. In "wanting to be every thing (she) thought (she) shouldn't be" Pat attempted to transcend societal rules that are used to define and prescribe female appearance and behaviour.

Pat explains the dating privilege of her heterosexual peers:

And I think they had the role models (heterosexuals). When my friend goes out with a guy she has a set of things that she knows what is going to happen. Like I don't have any idea.

Researcher: Like who opens the door, or does somebody have to open the door?

Pat: Or, or, or, or who asks the other one out, "So where are we going?"

Researcher: Who takes charge?

Pat: Who takes charge? Who plays dominant? Who plays sub-dominant? What are the roles in the relationship

Researcher: And does there have to be roles?

Pat: Or does there have to be roles, I guess that too.

Many people take for granted the culture around them and don't realize the important function it plays in providing role models. The dating game is based on certain standards and these standards are tied to the roles of female and male. It becomes a matter of behaviours being called common sense, when in fact they may not be common sense just common behaviour. Where and how do teen-aged lesbians learn the "rules" of dating, the suggested codes of behaviour?

The following excerpt from my interview with Pat describes her desire for respect based on her actions, not her sexual preference:

Pat: I need to be respected for who I am. What I have done in doing other activities, being involved environmentally, helping to do this women's issues weekend, and even this discussion (referring to activity at school). That certain level of respect meant one heck of a lot. Ya, that people looked at me and said that, "Hey I respect you for the things that you have done and who you are rather than perhaps your marks, your background."

Researcher: Judging you by your activities not, in a sense, your sexuality?

Pat: Ya, Ya, in a sense, the other role I play. I have always felt, I don't think of it as my sexuality, I think of it as I just play a different role than other people do. Am I making any sense? What I am saying is that I have always been different than the common thing. Part of that is my sexuality perhaps, but the other part is part of me too. And I don't like accepting the roles and expectations set out for me by society. A large part of that would probably be my sexuality, realizing, that I can't conform (unintelligible words). So I try to stay away from that and perhaps I can see things wrong with it because of it, because I have often felt like an outsider looking into the roles that other people are playing and I can see a lot of hypocrisy in that. And I don't just see that in people's roles, I see that in structures and many other things as well. When I try and find the role I play for myself it has always been, it has me thinking what is right for me, what would I like to do and how can I do this without stepping on too many toes but still express who I am. And part of it is expressing my sexuality, which partly came up in the Karate thing. Perhaps by expressing a male side of myself, or letting myself have some testosterone and not form the complete sissy female thing I could at least express that in a sense and not -- and normally refusing to wear, to wear dresses

and refusing to accept that female side of myself, um, is part of that. It is me taking a different role.

Again the above shows resistance to society's expectations of being female. When women are defined in terms of their sexuality they are kept in a subordinate position, as Lees (1986) states, "Defining girls in terms of their sexuality rather than their attributes and potentialities is a crucial mechanism in ensuring their subordination to boys and men" (p. 15). Pat is clear that she wants her actions to speak for her not her sexuality. Being on the outside, not because one necessarily chooses that position but because it was imposed on one by a heterosexist society, gives one a different perspective. The position of an outsider had the advantage, in this case, of seeing hypocrisy in both roles and structures. Do lesbian students, seeing through society's structures, have greater autonomy in defining their role than their heterosexual peers? Possibly they become less influenced by the constraints that go along with being female. In order to consolidate their identity they need to resist and in turn blaze their own path.

After leaving the institution and not having such a large investment in the system Brenda is able to look back and analyze her experience:

Gender wise I remember Like once you hit that grade (grade twelve) there is pressure (unintelligible words) (laughter) There is pressure to fit archetypical roles and because I didn't fit those roles, I wasn't prom queen . . . or a girl who was into make-up and boys . . . I never really seemed to fit one role. It didn't really seem like I had a role (unintelligible words). I like my role, not to have one type of thing, you know. I can look back but at the time I remember not really feeling that I fit into a social vehicle. I didn't date a whole lot in high school, I used to say that I didn't have the time for guys, and I didn't care what shade lipstick was, cause I actually didn't want to wear lipstick. And going to the dance must be the biggest event in my life, and all those social things that we are just

conditioned to -- that we're supposed to -- supposedly conditioned for, um, I didn't notice it but I notice it now when I look back. It didn't sort of bother me back then.

Coming Out

Reaction of Friends. Vicky, who went back to high school after graduating in order to upgrade, came out to her friends and some of her teachers. She states, "I was more myself and happier and I was producing better work." This time of admitting one's lesbianism to someone else is a time of great risk taking, requiring extreme courage. The relief I felt once I had tackled this hurdle (which comes up again and again) was liberating, and resulted in an overwhelming sense of satisfaction and greater ease with others. There is much to be said for having an authentic outward persona.

Vicky relates how her best friend was shocked with her news:

Ya, I think one of my friends was kind of shocked at first, she couldn't really talk to me for a week just trying to absorb it and then she was like, "Oh, it doesn't matter." (skipped section)

Researcher: So the friends that you told, the closest friend you told, that you were a lesbian, didn't talk to you for a week? Why do you think this happened?

Vicky: I think she was trying to absorb it, in what she knew of me probably because I used to be boy crazy, I would just fall in love with all these guys.

Researcher: Do you think that had to do with your knowing some how, deep down, what was going on?

Vicky: Oh! I think so. I think I was in total denial and went totally the other way trying to prove to myself and everybody else and this was completely unconsciously.

Vicky's friend knew her as a "raving" heterosexual and when she came out the friend needed to take the time to adjust. This student dated heterosexually, trying to fit in and was very convincing in that role since her best friend had no idea that she was

a lesbian. Anyone who has been in school can possibly recognize the pressure to "fit in". Imagine that pressure compounded by hostility directed at the secret you keep closely guarded. Even a best friend, a person you consider closer to you than anyone else, is not aware of your true sexual identity. This gives the indication of how hidden a person's sexuality can be. In April's case her best friend thought that she was going to go out with her old boyfriend again. April shares a similar coming out story to Vicky's in relating the shock of her best friend:

My best friend knows and, um, she kind of, at first, she didn't know how to handle it because I have known her for so long and she was like "Wow I didn't even know!" She totally didn't even suspect it or anything and she was really freaked out. So I didn't talk to her for a long time and all of a sudden I just started talking to her again and she kind of cooled down about it.

Researcher: So you guys talk now?

Vicky: Ya we talk now and she is like fine about it.

Researcher: It was just a shock?

Vicky: It was just a really big shock and she was under so much stress with school and she had to keep her marks up cause her parents would freak out. So she didn't want to deal with another problem. And it totally, it changes your outlook on somebody. How you see them. And I guess that really scared her because I had known her so well for so long, and I tell her something like this, she's just like, "uhuh!" You know? And she just got freaked out and didn't know what to do, didn't know what to say to me I guess. And she hasn't told anyone at school or anything like that so it is really good, I can really trust her.

April goes on to explain part of the reason for the shock of her friend:

. . . she didn't want to have to deal with it, because I always talked to her about problems and stuff in my family when actually it really wasn't my family. I was just so depressed because I couldn't come out, I was like so depressed, I knew nobody, I knew nobody like myself and I was so down I just hated everything and I was like, "Uuhh!" Cause you are so closed in you can't talk about it, you know no one who is, you think you are never going to meet anyone, the whole thing. And then when I finally told her, she just looked at me like, "Wow!" she said, "I don't want to have to deal with this, there are too many problems." You know because I

was talking to her about my family and everything and she didn't know what to do, she was like "What is going on?" She has her own problems, school and her family, she just didn't want to have to deal with it and go to school at the same time, so it really scared her but now that she has had a lot of time to think about it and still see who I am, that I am still the same person. Like I haven't changed at all, I am still who I am and she is like, "Ya it is fine." Like we still go out and stuff, everything is fine now but she has had a little bit of time to sort of soak in what has really happened.

The very powerful statement made by April above that, "I am still the same person" cannot be overlooked. As April stated previous to this, telling someone you are lesbian ". . . totally . . . changes your outlook on somebody." Being lesbian is part of who April is, it is part of her identity and influences her personality. I am who I am partly because of my sexuality, April is who she is and that identity involves being a lesbian. April has cut through the homophobic discourse stating, ". . . I am normal for who I am because I don't think it really matters if you are gay or straight or whatever, it is always normal but it is harder to be accepted."

The notion of normal sexual behaviour is often part of the rhetoric that condemns homosexuality. Being a lesbian is ". . . normal but it is harder to be accepted" states April who sees through the homophobic discourse. She is clear in her identity as a "normal" person who just happens to be a lesbian. The following quote from a European sexologist in 1937 demonstrates that regarding homosexuality, attitudes over the century have changed little:

. . . [in most homosexuals] manifestations of nervousness and neurasthenia . . . have developed during life out of an originally healthy state, in consequence of the struggle for life, the painful experience of being "different" from the great mass of people. (Iwan Bloch cited in Hetrick & Martin, p.490, 1987)

Depression Turns Around. A supportive family member can make a phenomenal difference for lesbians struggling to come to terms with their homosexuality. April states that "it started making me happy when I finally had someone to talk too."

Researcher: And so you were depressed for not being accepted and not being able to talk?

April: Ya, not being able to talk and scared to tell my family because I wanted to tell my family so bad, like I didn't know what they would say or what they would do, I didn't know if they wouldn't allow me to go over and stay at my friend's house or . . . "I am not going out with her, she is my friend!" You know, cause it is not every girl who I meet I am always attracted to, like every girl I meet I want to . . . It is like Oh! No! This is so hard, I didn't know if they would totally limit me on everything, and that is what I didn't want, I was scared that was going to happen and my sister was always saying, uh, talking to them about gays and what ever, so it was hard to sort of tell them but then one night when I was breaking up with my girlfriend, I was crying one night, and her room (sister) is right above mine and she heard me and the next day I found a letter and a poem on the bed and I started crying so hard because my sister is a poet. She is so good and it totally related, she totally knew and she said it is fine, I will always love you, no matter what you do, you haven't changed and I want you to be able to come to me . . . I was like wa! You know? We are great friends, . . . it started making me happy when I finally had somebody to talk to. When I met _____ when I entered hockey, I was just like, "Wow!". In the dressing room you can say whatever, do whatever. No one really cares, some people are, some people aren't, people don't care, they're in hockey. They have seen it all. Our coaches were living together, we knew they were together, they didn't deny it, they said, "Ya!" You know and it is great, you can see how a couple are together, or if they are together, they say they are married whether they have legal documents, I don't think so. And it is great because, um, because when you are in that you can see how a person acts, you can see that they are just normal people. And you can totally see that it is okay, ya, they are, but we like them. You know? We don't think anything bad about them and I think that when you see it more often then you are like, "It's normal!" You know? And it is great because you can just be who you are and say whatever and when I am there, I love going to hockey. It is so fun. You can just like come out and say whatever. (Laughter) And everyone just goes along with you, it is so fun. But when you are at school you can't say things like that - "Ya she's good look'in!" -- whatever.

Words on paper do not adequately convey the emotion of the discussion. When we turned to hockey and the fact that it was a safe environment the energy turned excited and fun. There are positive role models at hockey. Before April disclosed her lesbianism she

describes her depression as a "huge depression". Following up on this theme in the second interview April further described the profound influence the safe environment on her hockey team had on her:

April: I just about, so many times I thought about suicide. It was that serious, if I hadn't joined hockey I probably would have. It was so bad, I am totally different now from before. I was like all to myself. I never said anything to anybody, you can't. You don't know what they are going to say. What they are going to do And people are saying, "I can't stand dykes, can't stand fags." So you are so scared to say anything.

Researcher: So what grade was that about

April: The start of the depression? Seventh.

Researcher: Really, and you couldn't talk to your family? Ya, I couldn't talk to mine either.

April: I wasn't going to, too, because my mom has sort of always known, always wanted to keep up public relations. "If you were, it would be Okay!"

Researcher: Oh! they would say that to you before?

April: Ya, they would say that all the time, I'd be - "Okay mom but I am not!" And my sister would say stuff, "You know it would be Okay, you could even talk to Auntie _____ because she is too." "Okay! Okay! It's like alright." I never had enough guts, you know?

Researcher: Is that because you were afraid they would disown you?

April: No, no I knew they wouldn't, that everything would be fine, I just didn't know how to get the words out, because to even say gay or lesbian in my head it was so hard, ummahhh! It is like saying I love you to somebody ahhhhumm! I eventually just had to, I had a girlfriend and it was so hard, my mom knew, she totally knew as soon as I started hanging out on the phone all the time, my mom would say, "Boy, you are on the phone a lot." "So she's my friend." "Every day, same time every single night?" So she knew, she didn't confront me and say anything, she knew that I would eventually say something to her because she has known ever since I was two. I knew that she knew but I didn't mind I just wanted it to be the right time. I wanted to be comfortable telling her and then one day, I, I can't remember but I had to go and talk to her (her girlfriend). So I just took off, drove all the way to _____ and I, um, my mom phoned her house and said, "Get home right now!" And I said, "Mom, I can't." And I told her over the phone and she was screaming and yelling, "Get home!" She was so mad because I had taken off so when I had got home she goes, she comes downstairs, she goes "Do you want to talk?" so I told her and she goes "Okay! Just don't ever run away on me again."

Even with a supportive family, and homosexual relatives, it took a crisis situation in April's personal life to come out to her family. Previous to this she had been waiting for the right time to tell her mom.

April and her best friend are no longer as close as they were before the disclosure. In the following quote she describes the discomfort of her best friend and complete strangers around her lesbianism:

April: She didn't want to have anything to do with it. I would try to say something and she'd be like "I don't want to hear about it, I don't want to talk about it!" Sort of really closed down and I'm like ahhh! I don't want to say anything, kind of like she was embarrassed about it.

Researcher: Is she still like that?

April: No, No, now she is fine, she'll say, "How are you doing?" and start talking to me, but we aren't as close as we were before, before we were really, really close. I was always over there. We'd go out on weekends, but she didn't know, and now, that she knows she is kind of like, "Oh! Okay!" I find that even with my friends friends (lesbian friend at another school) they found out that I was. They know that I am because she talks about me all the time. I don't really care. I don't see them. I'm not around them. And when I went to her grad, I went to her after grad, they saw me and just sort of looked at me and they were scared. One girl, she even wouldn't go near me, she's like, "Uhhh she's hitting on me!" And all this stuff and I'm like, "What ever! I can't even stand you." I'm there talking to people and she's, "Ooohh, she is looking at me funny!" Totally making up stories that are not true.

The reaction faced by April from these strangers was likely based on stereotypes. These youth knew her as a lesbian and as such she was an assumed predator, attracted to women at random.

An "off the cuff" comment from Brenda's best friend sent her back into the closet for two more years. Teen-aged lesbians are very aware of the homophobic discourse in society since they are personally implicated. It is often easier to deal with such attitudes

from strangers but when they come from friends or family there can be serious repercussions:

Brenda: In grade eight I thought there is something here. And I went through a period of not dealing with it, where I did everything else. And in grade ten I thought Okay we're going to deal with it. And I went to my, um -- I had a close friend from _____, and I said, "You know, what if I was a dyke, what would you do?" And my best friend said she wouldn't be my friend anymore. And everyone else said they would be okay with it but that one little comment, um, she didn't think she was saying (unintelligible words) for me, it drove me back into the closet. So I didn't come out for another two years and we never talked about it after that.

Researcher: And now?

Brenda: Actually she was the first person, she, when I, when I saw her at the conference in August, I was obviously going through something. And she came and asked. And it turned out that every one of the women in that group except one, have thought for a long time that I was a lesbian or they thought I was bisexual. And, um, but they had just never said any thing and my friend didn't remember saying that comment in grade ten cause she never meant it. (Unintelligible words) It was just off the cuff, she never put any thought into it.

Pat's best friend did not pull away after their discussion about her sexuality. Pat disclosed to her best friend after a tremendous amount of thought:

Pat: Ya, well, I never actually discussed where I stood but I had a lot of fun. We would flirt a lot and that was an outlet. We were flirting for a long time before I sat down and told her, "I think I am at least bisexual if not lesbian." And during the course of the year I had been doing a lot of thinking.

Researcher: In grade eleven?

Pat: In grade eleven as I was realizing where I, I was kind of wondering where I stood. And I spent a lot of time thinking, in fact I was thinking, what is wrong with me first. I never thought at first

Researcher: What is wrong with society.

Pat: Yes, I was always thinking what is wrong with me. And I mean I would never ever say anything about that to my parents.

Naming. Pat describes below how she came out to her best friend and her difficulty saying the word "lesbian":

Pat: So I said, "I think, I think I am sort of something else." Like I couldn't, I had real trouble saying.

Researcher: The word . . .

Pat: The word lesbian.

Researcher: What did you do? Did you say the word bisexual?

Pat: It is a lot easier to say bisexual.

Researcher: Now why is that?

Pat: Cause that would mean that I wasn't completely far gone.

Researcher: Far gone? I don't like the sound of that. (Laughter.)

Pat: Well no, but that, that was just my attitude.

Researcher: That there still was a point of return, you could come back to society type of thing.

Pat: Exactly. Or, ya, maybe I will fall in love with a guy some day. And even now I still say that the potential is always there. And there is a really good friend of mine who, under the right circumstances, at one point we could have gone out. It still not, um, I think that would not be my first choice by any means.

Researcher: Not that it is a choice?

Pat: Ya, my language starting to sound a little.

Researcher: No, I am just saying you don't consider it a choice?

Pat: No, I don't consider it a choice. No, this friend who I love very dearly, (unintelligible words) um, the only way we would have gone out together was with the understanding that this would be following perhaps society's norms for me. I know that I loved him very much but I wasn't romantically inclined although we have a very strong loving friendship. I don't think it could culminate into something romantic, where as I think I am sort of in the process of getting to know a lesbian better at the college. And we are sort of on that iffy stance. I think we are starting to care about each other a lot, the romantic attraction thing is there in a way it wasn't with _____ (male friend).

Researcher: How did your friend handle it when you came to her and said that you think something is up?

Pat: When I said I am at least bi if not gay? Um, she handled it very well. She was great. She is an amazing person. I love her dearly and we are still very good friends.

Researcher: So she didn't pull away at all?

Pat: No, she didn't pull away at all. She kept on flirting with me and she realized it was sort of an outlet for me and we could talk about it a bit more and that was great.

By not saying the word lesbian Pat was trying to hold onto the possibility that she wasn't too "far gone" in that there was still hope for her to fulfill society's roles. When a woman labels herself lesbian she has made a giant step away from what she has been socialized to believe she should be. Labelling is both liberating and oppressive. Liberating in the sense that once one names herself lesbian she can move forward redefining and re-realizing part of who she is. Labelling is oppressive where it categorizes people in narrowly defined identities. When we categorize/label people we no longer need to think about the individual. When Eve gives back her name in Ursula Le Guin's (1990) short story, "She Unnames Them" Eve is no longer able to speak in a taken for granted way:

I resolutely put anxiety away, went to Adam, and said, "You and your father lent me this -- gave it to me, actually. It's been really useful, but it doesn't exactly seem to fit very well lately. But thanks very much! It's really been very useful. . . . (Without names) I could not chatter away as I used to do, taking it all for granted. My words must now be slow, as new, as single, as tentative as the steps I took. . . . (pp. 235-236)

Journal Entry

There we were sitting in a restaurant that advertises itself as a family restaurant, conducting our interview about being a lesbian

in high school. I was cautious, not wanting to speak too loudly, worried of others around that might overhear. My counterpart on the other hand didn't seem to have any of my concerns, she seemed delighted to be discussing the topic, even enthusiastic. There I was with a fun, keen participant struggling with my homophobia that was threatening to censor my words. We are not that far apart generation wise, only twelve years separate us. Perhaps it is her youth, the sense of freedom she feels being out of earshot of her home town talking with another lesbian. Lesbian- saying the word out loud in a "family" restaurant caused me to pause. I have noticed reading through the transcripts that I often struggled to name this identity. Some times I didn't want to put words into the mouths of the participants, other times I didn't want the word to offend. I ask myself about this; Who would the word offend?- me. I think it was a matter of me projecting my biases. I have led such a carefully protected life behind the guise of heterosexual student and guarded teacher.

When one labels herself lesbian it is a naming that carries far reaching ramifications.

Every time we interrupt, speak out defiantly, and/or name our differences, we risk the loss of our community, home, and friends. So too in the classroom, difference is spoken at great risk but what is this "safety" which depends upon silence, politeness, and "comfortable" speech?" (Rockhill, 1993, p. 356)

Is it part of female socialization that manifests itself in the desire to conform to heterosexual culture that makes it so difficult to say the word lesbian? Do women aim to please so much that they deny their identity? Respect the wishes of others, be good girls,

grow up, meet a nice man, fall in love, get married, have children- live happily ever after - the Cinderella dream. How can one throw that all out the window at such a young age? By labelling oneself lesbian you seem to be going against everything, that up to this point, has defined "women".

In the second interview April speaks about the struggle to name herself a lesbian:

Researcher: . . . trying to live to everyone's expectations then trying to say I am -- you know you can't even say the word to yourself how can you say it to other people?

April: Ya, it is hard, saying it out loud too somebody uhhh!

Researcher: Because I don't even think I said it out loud to my parents.

April: I didn't even say it. When I said it to _____ (best friend) I said "Um, I'm." And she said, "You're going to go out with that guy aren't you?" And I am like, "No I'm not." And she goes, "Ya, you are." And I am like, "NO I AM NOT!" And she goes, "What do you mean?" Cause I think she kind of knew when I started saying that. I go well, "I like other ones." She's like, "What do you mean?" And I am like, "Other ones." And she's like, "Ah! Oh! Okay! I would have never have guessed that."

Researcher: Ya, it is so hard to say that word.

April: Ya!

Researcher: It is really tough.

April: Ya!

Researcher: And then when you finally say it you can't stop.

April: Ya, you can't stop. (laughter) It is easier to say gay then to say the other one.

Researcher: It is easier to say gay then lesbian, I wonder why that is? Maybe because people say gay more often.

April: Ya, sort of like in general, that is what I find.

Would you talk to a teacher? In the following passages April discuss why she could not speak to a teacher about her sexuality. In

three of the interviews the participants talk about teachers keeping the personal out of the classroom. In the last excerpt April talks about not having the discourse available to bring up the topic nor the nerve.

April:

Researcher: What about the teacher that was rumored to be lesbian, did you ever think about asking her?

April: No, I would never talk to a teacher because I don't know what they would say. You don't know whether, cause they are so like, they teach you stuff. If you talk about anything personal like (unintelligible words). I don't know, it is still so uncomfortable to talk to a teacher like that. Like, some are on a more personal level and others are just there solely for the teaching. They teach you about this, and other teachers are, like, you can talk to them; you can go and have a conversation. Like my math teacher. He was my teacher for one year and I would go and talk to him and I would say "hi" to him in the hallways and stuff. She is not my teacher, so I don't really think I could go and talk to her. She'd be like "Who are you?" "Like where did you come from?" and "Why are you talking to me about this?" (laughter)

Pat:

Researcher: Do you think that the peer helping is a much better idea than going to a teacher or a counsellor?

Pat: Um, in most situations the peers are more likely to encounter --well, no that is not true.

Researcher: Because you would tell your friend about your attractions more so than you would tell a counsellor?

Pat: Oh! Most certainly. I would trust my friend a lot more.

Researcher: What about any teachers?

Pat: Um, looking back there was one. I know that if I was to come out to her when I go back, she is a very good friend of mine, and, um, she is a biology teacher and we got along very very well. And I am sure she wouldn't have a problem with it.

Researcher: But at school you didn't feel comfortable saying anything to her.

Pat: It just, no not in the student-teacher relationship that we had.

Vicky (Note this is the second time she was in grade twelve, when she went back to high school for upgrading.):

Vicky: I was out to a couple of my teachers [When I returned to high school for the second time.]

Researcher: Were they supportive?

Vicky: Ya, I don't know if that was because -- they tend to have different relationships with their students, much more of a peer friend thing than some of the other teachers . . . [the other teachers] are like, "We know more than you, you are a student, I am a teacher." Totally divided. That was their teaching style.

Brenda:

Researcher: Did you ever think about talking to any teachers in the school? Ones that gave you any sort of indication that they would be supportive?

Brenda: For most of that time I didn't deal with it in school so much except that I, I went through periods of depression and I remember now I can, I remember my science teacher, my chemistry teacher, um, one minute I just came apart last year (unintelligible words). But he was this great single guy. Like, we didn't realize he had AIDS. Everyone rumored, and that was a rumor that we did hear, and I forgot to mention that. And I always thought he was the coolest guy and I, we'd go hang out in his classroom at lunch time cause he liked that. And I just, I, I felt a connection there but I, I didn't have the nerve to say anything and I wanted to. Actually I did try to make an attempt to talk to the guidance counsellor who worked for peer helpers. I had no way, like I couldn't (unintelligible words).

Homosexuality and Schools

School Atmosphere. Schools are not locations where homosexuality is able to be discussed in a positive light amongst peers. By taking a positive stand for homosexuality a person could be labelled homosexual. Homosexuality is not something that people always wear on their sleeve. You become suspect when you go against the status quo and take a supportive stance for same sex relationships. April strongly agrees that the school atmosphere could be classified as homophobic stating the following:

If you are straight and you accept it, you yourself would be put down and if you said you accepted it, they'd be like "What! You actually accept that? wow!" And maybe they would say something about you, (unintelligible words). If someone said "It is stupid, I hate gays," you wouldn't go, "Actually it is okay! It's all right," because I have done that at school and people go, "What is wrong?" And I

am like, "Okay, I have my faults ahhhh!" (laughter) Like go through the roof. Like everyone is so scared of accepting it. Why?

Researcher: And that is the question. Why do you think they are?

Participant: What is different, we are not killing any one -- we are not, so something is a little bit different, everyone is like, "Whew!"

Analysis and critical thinking skills are lacking in schools in the opinion of Pat. If there were more questioning and discussion of stereotypes there would in turn possibly be a shift in people's attitudes, especially if those attitudes are based on ignorance.

Pat:

You're sort of an open ear and you are filling yourself up with whatever is given to you. And I think what would be really good in the school system is more analysis of what is actually being fed to you . We do a course at the college called the "Theory of Knowledge". It is basically a study of the sources of your knowledge and how we accept things and analyzing them for their biases and the hidden things that come out through them. And if there was more emphasis on that in schools I think that perhaps it would take the edge of people's stereotypes and take a look at their values, take a look at their ideas and start learning to re-evaluate things on their own. I think that is a skill that needs to come out in schools a lot more.

April discusses the signals that are implicit in school suggesting that society does greater harm by sheltering students from difference than it would by discussing difference:

I think it would be more accepted if you were taught everything when you were younger. And you were brought up to think that it was normal. Okay to be who you are and don't fall into the mold that you gotta be this; you gotta go with a guy, you are a girl you go with a guy, if you are a guy you go with a girl. Cause you're always taught that, you are never taught the other way until when you are older, much older and you are already a teenager, "Oh ya, by the way there are people that are gay. And that's not good and you are going to get picked on." . . . And if you were taught at a young age that it's okay, it's all right it's part of life, you know, it's normal, like, then it would be more accepted. But you are not taught it until you are much older. It's stupid. It's how society is. They shelter you from everything that they think is different.

Safety in School. The two participants quoted below stayed safe in school through living a lie. They played a role, the role of a

heterosexual student careful not to let anything slip that might give away their sexual orientation. In the first quote Brenda discusses how she kept herself extremely busy in school to relieve the pressure around finding a boyfriend.

Brenda:

All through high school I, um, I dated rarely. Like I can count on this hand how many times I actually said I had a crush on a boy. And in the meantime I acted on that less. And the thing I always said was, "I am an independent women, I don't need a man, I'm too busy." And I threw myself into everything else. I did everything. So in that way I took pressure off myself and put a whole lot of other pressure on me. But it was the only subconsciouses thing I did. And then when I went to the dances, I went to all of the dances as the head of the dances, so I worked the door, I was in the office counting money, I worked the canteen, I had to do bathroom patrol. So I had like five minutes at the dance so then I could just pack dance. So I removed a lot of pressure that way. And, um, because I was so involved I never really got up tight about having a boyfriend.

April:

Participant: Ya, because if I ever came out in school there be real trouble.

Researcher: You know, I see it my school too.

Participant: Cause you are so scared, so, there are so many people and every one would know. Once someone finds out bla, bla, and then everyone would know some people would accept it and some people wouldn't.

In the second interview April gives concrete examples of homophobia within her school.

I have heard people talk about; "Ya, my brother is gay, he lives in _____ now." And they are just totally bad talking about him, their own brother, their step brother, not really a close brother but a still it's close. So that is why I would never do it cause everybody would just be talking about you and you would have so much stress of people saying things.

Researcher: Ya, Ya, not knowing if someone -- how they are going to react and if they think they should beat you up or something.

Participant: Ya, going around writing stuff on your locker. That happened three lockers down from me, someone wrote "fag". I'm just like uhh! I felt so bad for him, I don't know who did it, I don't even think he is, too."

These examples of the hostility targeting homosexuals or those perceived to be homosexual are explicit signifiers of a deeply embedded fear or hatred of homosexuality. Actions such as writing "fag" on a locker for some perceived gender nonconformity exposes the intolerance present in today's schools. Tolerance. As I wrote this I got a sense of uneasiness, is it tolerance I would like to see? ("You're okay as long as we don't hear about your life style and heaven forbid if you should show affection in public.") I would like to see the end of fear and hatred which may be erased with greater education, by the breaking down of stereotypes. With this may come more than just tolerance. When someone writes slurs that are meant to hurt, dehumanize and threaten others, they reinforce oppression. Friere (1982) has the following to say on the violence of oppressors:

But while both humanization and dehumanization are real alternatives, only the first is man's vocation. This vocation is constantly negated, yet it is affirmed by that very negation. It is thwarted by injustice, exploitation, oppression, and the violence of the oppressors; it is affirmed by the yearning of the oppressed for freedom and justice, and by their struggle to recover their lost humanity. (p. 28)

These lesbians see, live and hear their oppression daily yet they speak with strong resilient voices. They are aware of the unfairness but do not admit defeat, tapping an inner strength that has been forced into action. They are clear in their self knowledge that society is not always right and that the voices and actions of a few ignorant people do not represent the sentiment of all people. By

not taking a stand against the oppressors the school system does a great disservice to queer youth, who need to find their own support mechanisms often outside of, and in spite of the system.

Dating Pressure. As a teenager, April realizes that she does not have the power within the system to change the heterosexism. In the following exchange she talks about accepting the status quo until she has the freedom to express herself in a safe environment:

April: But if I ever told any one, they'd be like, "Wow!" All these guys are hitting on me and all these guys want to go out me and it's like, "Oh God!" If they ever knew, they'd just die.

Researcher: Well, isn't that pressure, like it is really intense pressure to date, isn't it?

April: Yes, there is so much pressure because you are in grade twelve and everyone wants a date to go to the prom. And like all this stuff -- well, I could for fun, you know, but then they'd want more and ahhh!

Researcher: And, but what about the prom? Have you decided to go or?

April: Well, I am going to go, ya. And I have to wear a dress. And like I haven't looked. I am not into dressing up like this, I don't know. It's weird.

Researcher: So can you go as a single to the prom or do you have to have a date to go to your school prom?

April: No, I can go alone cause there are a lot of people going for fun and not taking any dates. And I was thinking of taking somebody just for fun like, not like were going out, but you know just for fun.

(later in the interview)

Researcher: And the dating thing, you might go to the prom with your ex?

April: Ya, It is kind of hard because you have to dance with guys. And I guess, I don't know. You have to accept it. That is the way it is, until I am older and I can go to (large city) and go to the clubs, anything goes. (Laughter) It is hard because you want to be able to but you know if you did everyone would drop dead, all of a sudden you are dancing with another girl.

Researcher: Do you have to watch what you say?

April: Ya. And how you say it.

Researcher: And what about what you wear.

April: Ya. And what you wear.

In the second interview April had changed her mind about attending the prom: ". . . it would be kind of like playing a role that you don't really want to, faking it or something."

Journal Entry, The Prom

She was tense, all the talk at school over the last week was about graduation and the prom. She didn't know how it happened. The Prom. That meant finding a date or waiting to be asked by a male to go with him to the prom, the great ceremony of one of life's great transitions. The emphasis and daily chatter about the prom made her more isolated and self-conscious. Why were there no boys she would want to go with? She was going crazy, the thought of going with another girl streaked across her psyche long enough to push her into a tense, confused state. It isn't fair. Everything in her life told her it was wrong, everyday closer to the prom reinforced her difference. And dressing up, she didn't even own a dress, never mind a tube of lipstick.

I keep coming back to the prom, this write of passage, but whose write of passage? I never realized how much it bothered me until I started to formulate my recollections for my thesis. Going with a male date, celebrating with a male is built into the entire structure of the prom. For me it confounded my confusion and heightened my awareness around my sexuality in a very painful way during my adolescence.

Stereotypes. April discusses how she can tell if a teacher is homosexual:

There is a teacher I know who is. It is mostly ladies, like I don't know any guys. It is hard to tell with them, I don't know. Like a guy could wear a suit to school. The

women I can tell because they are all like totally short like a guy hair cut, she'll wear more like a man's sort of like outfit. You can tell it is more masculine and the way they walk and the way they talk, you, I don't know you can just sense it. And people say, "Ya she is, I saw her at the bar with another lady." Like, "Okay! you got into the bar how?" "Ya, ya, she must be, she was with this girl and you should have seen what they were doing." Oh my god, you hear all these things. Oh! and everyone is fine about them. I know that two of the teachers, they are, and that is about it. And everyone is fine with them and they say, "Oh ya, she has got a girlfriend, she is a lesbian" or whatever. But they don't do anything. They don't say anything. They would never say it to her face. Never! You hear it amongst the students, but I don't know.

A woman gets labelled lesbian if she has what are considered male characteristics. Should I say that this assumption is made by some one who should know better? No. How would teen-aged lesbians know better, they are influenced by the stereotypes all around them. There seems to be a general assumption made by many people that a women who may have masculine mannerisms or masculine appearance is a lesbian. Maybe this goes back to the student who completely changed her appearance when she came out, attempting to be everything she thought she shouldn't.

Pat discusses how stereotypes have influenced her. She is aware that she has been affected by these stereotypes. To deal with these she realizes that dialogue would help expose and re-evaluate them.

I still have a whole bunch of prejudices. And I still don't really understand what I am talking about or what I am thinking. And I am not saying that I will never understand this but, um, I think I would feel a whole lot more comfortable spending time with people and, um, and getting more chances to talk, even have some role models.

Difficulty Finding Youth. I was discussing with April the difficulty of finding teenagers who identified as lesbians to participate. At 18 she has noticed that the homosexual world is that

of the gay man and that women are not very visible. April suggests that if there were more lesbian role models then maybe more women would come out.

Researcher: . . . women don't seem to be as forward as the guys

April: Scared.

Researcher: Ya, maybe that is it.

April: Cause some guys are like you know, stronger, bigger, they can put up with it.

Researcher: Defend themselves?

April: Defend themselves, girls would just get killed. It is also with guys, there are so many. I don't know. There are so many that are out and they're not afraid to be out, so it would be easier if women -- it is so hard to find people to talk to, people who are out.

Response to School District Letters

I applied to two school districts asking for permission to post notices calling for research participants within their high schools. The two responses reflect opposite points of view. The first School District I applied to approved my request for research. Their letter stated the following:

I am pleased to inform you that at the regular meeting of the Board of School Trustees on April 1, 1996, your request for research entitled "Qualitative Study of the Experiences of Lesbians Within High School" was approved, subject to the following:

- a) that the participation be on a voluntary basis as previously requested;
- b) that the identity of all participants be kept confidential;
- c) the results of the research project be shared with School District _____.

We wish you success with your project.

This district was cautious but supportive of my project request. Before I received final approval I needed to ensure that the University of Victoria was given prominence on all paper work to clearly show that the research was not through the School District.

The second School District, which is larger in size, listed four main reasons for the denial of my study request. The first reason was as follows:

1. The private interviews you propose may involve the discussion of sensitive personal matters including the possible disclosure of abuse. It does not appear to us that you currently have the training or qualifications which would be appropriate to conduct such interviews.

The above reason raised two interesting points. First of all, I do not have counselling training for working with abuse survivors; however, I fail to see the connection between my research topic and issues of abuse. Is the assumption that lesbians, as a population, are victims of abuse? An additional issue is why would this School District be fearful of an adult learning about the abuse of a youth? Silence allows for dehumanizing behaviour to continue without the intervention of appropriate professionals. In my request through the University I established a protocol to deal with sensitive issues if they arose. The request to conduct research clearly outlined the themes around which question would arise, the focus being the institution of school and not personal family issues or issues of abuse.

The second point was the following:

2. The District, in giving employees or volunteers access to children in its care, may be subject to liability. The permission for the posting of bulletins gives access. The District does not wish to assume liability for activities over which it has no control.

This is a valid concern. The research I proposed involved the consent of both the student and a parent or guardian. What are the activities they are referring to? This research involved sitting down with the student to discuss their thoughts about lesbianism in school. I fail to see how talking may result in a liability law suit. The consent forms also clearly describe the study and reinforce the voluntary nature of participation which could in turn be withdrawn at any time.

The third point was:

3. The expressed sensitivity of some of our parental and professional community about posting of such requests, and our district's commitment to consultative process, would require school principals to present this proposal to their school community (parent advisory councils and teachers) for approval before proceeding further.

All right, so ask the parent advisory councils, open up a dialogue around the issue. I am intrigued by the first line regarding the "expressed sensitivity" of some parents and staff. This would suggest to me that the issue of homosexuality has been discussed and is opposed by this group whose size and constitution is unclear. Through denying discussion and educational opportunities, this intangible group perpetuates the hostile climate that forces students to hide. Sears' (1992) statement on the Moral Right in the United States and their continual attack against opening up dialogue

seems to be applicable here: "because they accept the axiom that sexual knowledge may lead to sexual activity, no Tree of Knowledge is welcomed in the Garden of the True Believer" (p. 147). This can be a dangerous situation for our public school system if a few members of a community can close down educational opportunities that so oppresses its members, particularly the young gay, lesbian and bisexual. With dialogue effectively closed the system can remain blind to the needs of a portion of their school population.

4. All employees or volunteers must undergo a criminal records check before having access to students. This procedure is underway system-wide at the present time and there is an expectation that researchers requesting access to children in the District's care will be expected to comply.

The final point on the letter is a moot point since I am a member of the College of Teachers and as such have undergone a criminal records check. In my application I made it clear that I was a high school teacher in the public school system in British Columbia.

The letter ends on a conciliatory note suggesting that I advertise at the University for recent high school graduates. The School District also apologized for the amount of time it took for them to respond to my request. This School District took approximately three weeks longer than the first district to respond to my request.

These two opposite responses to my research come from different paradigms. As educators we need to ask what is in the best interest of our youth, not what is politically acceptable. I am close to this issue and am making assumptions based on points number one

and three from the letter that denied access to the high schools. I was angry and disappointed with this rejection. It reinforced for me the lack of commitment on the part of the education system to learn how better to meet the needs of lesbian youth.

Discussion

Appearances

Virginia Woolfe (1989) in her book, Sketch of the Past explains why she writes:

. . . it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. (p. 78)

The above sentiment expressed by Virginia Woolfe reflects a similar desire I had with this research which was to step out from behind appearances, both mine and that of the participants. Appearances are often quite important for queer youth, appearances can help lesbians hide an authentic self. To engage the person behind the appearance, dialogue needs to be initiated. Unfortunately, teen-aged lesbians do not have the opportunities at school to discuss their sexuality or gender. The fear of being exposed to a hostile society keeps them within their shell, as April said during our interview: "It feels like you are in a box and I just want to get out and be myself." When I told a colleague about my research he questioned whether there were any lesbian and gay youth at our school (grades eight-ten, 650 students). This startling question signalled for me how appearances can hide the truth. It also exposes the assumption of universal heterosexuality in schools ". . . which is encoded in language, in institutional practices and the encounters of everyday life" (Epstein & Johnson, 1994, p. 198).

The interviews with these young lesbians taught me about the resilience of the human spirit. I was inspired by the ability of these four youth to cut through the shroud of ignorance and create for themselves their own roles. From underneath their guarded exterior came their thoughts, opinions and feelings. I have attempted to provide space for the voices of these lesbian youth to be heard. I trust that their voices stand on their own, as they spoke to me about their first hand experience of attending a school system that gave them no affirmation or information around their emerging lesbian identity.

Silence in schools from teachers, who are in a position to provide information as well as putting an end to homophobic name-calling, stands out as a blight on the public school system. Silence reproduces and feeds further ignorance and abuse against lesbians and gays. Silence prevents positive information about homosexuality from reaching students that are struggling to name their difference and define their identity within the heterosexist world of high school. When a teacher opposes homophobic comments it can make a world of difference to a lesbian student. This resistance can give comfort to lesbian students; it may also help to dispel some myths which in turn are used to place minorities into boxes based on stereotypes.

During the interviews and throughout the literature the common practice of hiding one's sexual identity surfaces repeatedly. Pat, Brenda and April spoke specifically to the fact that they were forced to isolate their authentic sexual inner-self from a hostile outside world. They were isolated, not only from school

contemporaries but also from people normally seen as supportive such as family and best friends. In turn this isolation resulted in depression and the ever present need to self-monitor. April, Pat and Vicky spoke about the relief they experienced when they finally disclosed their sexuality. Silence was still important for these young lesbians since safety from hostile strangers was protected by only telling trusted individuals.

Gender Outsiders

The lesbian identity of April, Brenda, Pat and Vicky led them to question typical gender role stereotypes. Gender was still a constraining factor for them; however, their difference gave them a different vantage point from which to question the structures of gender. The gender schema theory which generally states that individuals are internally motivated to conform to society's gender standards seems applicable here. These students were motivated to conform on one level; they were motivated from a place of fear of exposure. Their worlds were organized in terms of male and female but in realizing that they were lesbians they needed to redefine who they were as women. April, Brenda, Pat and Vicky all spoke of the freedom they felt to create their own direction. Gender categories did not apply to them in a strict sense since they were not personally invested in heterosexuality. April, Brenda and Pat did not channel their energies into the common adolescent preoccupation of finding a boy friend. April was very involved with sports and both Brenda and Pat took on numerous extracurricular activities including peer helpers. Both Brenda and Pat had a keen social consciousness

and were actively involved in helping to improve the environment at their schools through their various commitments.

All the participants spoke of being different, being outside of the "norm". Straight youth may in turn have this same feeling yet their identity is not one that is attacked, feared and hated. This outsider position is a place that either causes one to deny what they know or to engage in analysis of their situation. If lesbians are forced to question gender roles early in life and in a very personal way, are they in turn more likely to resist such categories? Are lesbians more likely to entertain thoughts of pursuing non-traditional roles in the work force? Are they more likely to focus on a career choice that is less traditional for their gender, yet one they may be more interested in since they do not have as much invested in the male gaze as their heterosexual peers? If gender is no longer such a constraining factor and the traditional model of marrying and finding support in a marriage is not going to be part of their future, what does this give to the young lesbian? Do they have a stronger resistance to society's norms seeing them for the constructions they are? Are the gender categories less limiting to lesbian youth than their heterosexual peers?

School Curriculum

Including gay and lesbian themes in the curriculum may help open dialogue but it will not change the basic heterosexist foundation of the system (refer to Britzman, 1995). Acceptance and tolerance are important but they still do not address the underlying systems that perpetuate homophobia. Goldberg states, "The commitment to tolerance turns only on modernity's 'natural

inclination' to intolerance; acceptance of otherness presupposes as it once necessitates the deligitimation of the other" (cited in Britzman, 1995, p.159). There needs to be a complete restructuring of a system that privileges heterosexuality daily in the structures and activities of a school such as school graduation ceremonies. Critical analysis within classrooms by both teachers and students alike is needed to expose basic assumptions.

The interviews also show the need for teen-aged lesbians to have access to positive information about lesbian issues. In the experience of these four lesbians, however, this information was not available within the school system. School librarians need to realize that young lesbians may find it difficult to access information regarding sexuality because of the stigma involved. A possible solution for libraries desiring to provide accurate information to the student body could be to stock inexpensive booklets. If these booklets do go missing then they could be replaced with little cost. Material about lesbian and gay issues could also be in locations that are quickly and easily accessible. Brenda offers a suggestion here,

. . . posters are a big one -- like in the guidance office you see things on racism, and sexist, and classism, and agism but you don't see a lot on heterosexism and homophobia. And a simple poster. It doesn't have to say kids are gay but And some queer youth walking through the halls might happen to notice that this office has something that is reflective of them and for me that would have been nice to see.

Friendship

The youth women I interviewed did not complain that they were not able to form close friendships with other females. In fact, close friendships were clearly important. From my experience it seems that women have more freedom compared to men to show intimate expressions for same sex friends without getting labelled lesbian. Gay youth may not have the same freedom. Martin (1982) states:

The process of deception may hinder the development of nonerotic friendships between members of the same sex. During this transition between childhood and adulthood, when it is difficult to separate feelings of friendship from erotic feelings, the young gay adolescent must be careful not to become too close for fear the closeness will be misunderstood on either side. (p. 59)

For the young women I spoke with there was no mention of confusing close friendship with sexual attraction; however, I did not specifically ask questions to further elucidate this area.

Your/My Role in Improving the Environment in Our Schools

It is clear to me from both talking with these four lesbians and my personal experience that schools are forcing grounds for homophobic attitudes. These attitudes result from the compounding effect of silence, fear, ignorance and lack of effort to reduce verbal harassment. Teachers have a clear and vital role to play in reducing prejudice at their schools. With the support of the administration, homophobic name calling can be exposed for the oppressive and hateful message it conveys. A fundamental goal of the school system is to educate and open young minds to knowledge, so schools should be in the forefront of developing an atmosphere that respects and honours diversity. I am guilty of letting homophobic remarks go

unchallenged in my classroom. The teen-aged lesbians I interviewed for this research reminded me of how I felt as an adolescent. My armour has been forged over many years; they have helped me to see my complicity in the same system they rail against. I feel it is only fitting to end with a suggestion to all teachers from April:

Talk more about it. Educate at a younger age. Start talking about love, life about relationships. It is always talked about one way. Always talked about the straight way, it is never ever talked about from a gay perspective.

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Information Letter to Participant

Project Title: *A Qualitative study of the life experiences of lesbian adolescents within high school: Implications for school personnel*

My name is Phyllis MacLeod. I am a full time graduate student at the University of Victoria in the Faculty of Education. Previous to my enrollment in this programme I was a teacher in a northern community. I am currently working on my Masters' thesis which will focus on how school is experienced by a sample of lesbian adolescents. There has been little attention paid to the school culture and its impact on lesbians. With this research, I hope that we will broaden the understanding of school personnel as well as other adolescents to the experiences and specific concerns of lesbian adolescents.

Are you interested in sharing your experience?

The following information will help you with this decision.

I will be interviewing self-identified lesbian adolescents that are currently attending or have recently attended high school. The participants must be willing to discuss their experiences within the school system that relate to their sexual orientation.

If you decide to participate, we can negotiate the number of interviews. The minimum number that I would request would be two so that you will be given the opportunity to review the transcripts

from the first interview. I estimate the time for each interview will be approximately one hour each. The interviews will be semi-structured and as a volunteer you will not be obligated to answer any questions you don't feel comfortable answering. I would anticipate that the interviews will be more like conversations rather than a question and answer session.

The interviews will be audiotaped, with your permission, and then transcribed. You will be given the opportunity to review our interviews by reading the transcripts in order to add or remove information at your discretion. The audiotapes will be erased once the thesis is completed.

The transcripts will be coded so that your name does not appear on the document. Your name and the names mentioned during the interviews will not be mentioned in the transcripts or appear anywhere on the final product. Anonymity will be of utmost importance and the information gathered will not identify individuals.

If you would like to part of this research please contact me at 391-0921 or email me at phyllism@uvic.ca. Please call with any questions. If you are calling long distance please call me collect. Thank you for your consideration.

Appendix B

Consent Form for Participants

I, _____ (print name) consent to being a participant in this study: A qualitative study of the experiences of lesbian adolescents within the school system: Implications for school personnel.

Please sign below after reading the following statements.

* I understand that this research is looking at my experiences within the context of school and that I will be asked to provide information on this topic.

* I understand that my participation is voluntary.

* I understand that all data collected in this study will remain confidential; interview results will be kept in a locked cabinet. Anonymity will be protected by using code numbers. My name will not appear on any published results.

* I understand that I am not expected to, and should not, in any way identify third parties. The protection of privacy of other individuals is an important consideration and will be respected in the interviews.

* I understand that my interview will be audiotaped and that the tape will be erased immediately after the thoughts/feelings/experiences that I talk about are written down. I also understand that if I do not wish to have my interview taped, I can refuse to do so.

* I understand that I may pass on any question or withdraw my participation at any time.

* I understand the procedures to be used in this study.

Date: _____

Please print name: _____

Signature: _____

Appendix C

Parental Consent Form

(Department Letter Head)

Consent Form to Parents

Background information to my research:

My name is Phyllis MacLeod. I am a full time graduate student at the University of Victoria in the Faculty of Education. Previous to my enrollment in this programme I was a teacher in a northern community. I am currently working on my Masters' thesis.

The study I am organizing involves the investigation of the school system and its treatment of minority youth, specifically homosexual youth. The data will be collected through interviews. Each participant will be asked to take part in at least two interviews to discuss their thoughts/feelings/opinions on this topic.

The participants can withdraw at any time. All the data collected will be confidential and anonymity will be protected by using code names. The resulting information will be instrumental in broadening the understanding of school personnel to the concerns of this minority group within today's schools.

As the parent or guardian of _____, I, _____ give my consent for them to participate in this study that is aimed at understanding the experiences of homosexual adolescents within high schools.

Date: _____

Name (please print): _____

Signature: _____

Appendix D

Notice

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

MASTER'S THESIS, UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA

TOPIC: HIGH SCHOOL FROM A LESBIAN PERSPECTIVE

There has been little attention paid to school culture and its impact on lesbians. If you identify as a lesbian and would like to discuss your experiences/thoughts/opinions of school I would like to hear from you. All participation is confidential. Anonymity will be of utmost importance and the information gathered will not identify any individuals. If you are eighteen years of age or under parental consent is needed in order to participate.

If you would like to take part in this research please contact me at the University of Victoria @ **721-7799** and leave a message for Phyllis MacLeod. Please call with any questions.

Appendix E

Cover Letter to School Districts

Phyllis MacLeod
561 Treanor Ave.
Victoria, B.C.
V9B 3H4

School District Address

Dear Mr. _____:

I am a high school science teacher, undertaking my Master's programme at the University of Victoria. I am currently seeking participants for my thesis research into the experiences of lesbians in high school. I am writing to request permission to place a letter size notice in secondary schools within your district in order to locate research participants. A copy of the notice is enclosed in this package. Students will not be interviewed at school, I only request the space to locate volunteers.

From the many studies carried out to date it is clear that the school system is not meeting the needs of homosexual youth. Through this research greater awareness will be gained about lesbian youth within the school system. When we begin to see school from the perspective of marginalized youth, we as educators will be better able to meet their needs.

I have enclosed material that describes my research project, a copy of my certificate of approval from the university, consent forms and the information letter to participants. I can be contacted at 391-0921 if you have any questions.

Thank you very much.

Yours truly,

Phyllis MacLeod

Research Outline

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the personal experiences of lesbian youth focussing on the way in which their sexual orientation impacts or is impacted upon within high school. The information gathered will deepen the understanding of school personnel in order to reduce the stress on this minority population.

I will be the only interviewer for the entire research project. The participants will be self identified lesbians currently attending high school. They will be located through newspaper/newsletter advertisements, gay and lesbian organizations such as PFLAG (Parents and Family of Lesbians and Gays) and through lesbian radio shows (UVIC student radio and the Vancouver co-op station).

Once the participants have contacted me they will be given the information letter and consent forms. We will begin when the paperwork is complete. Interviews will commence in November 1995 and continue until May, 1996 depending upon the sign up time of the individuals.

The format of the interviews will be open ended, focusing on the experience of being a lesbian in high school. Some of the topics will be as follows:

- * school activities and the participant's involvement
- * close friendships within school
- * the witnessing of verbal or physical violence against homosexuals at school

- * discussions of homosexuality in class and how it was handled
- * feelings of being 'out' in school or remaining 'in the closet'

The participants will be given the opportunity to review their interviews and make changes where they deem necessary. I see the participants as partners in this research and therefore they will have an equal voice in what remains in the final product.

There will be at least three interviews between myself and each participant. The interviews will last from 60 to 90 minutes each. Further interviews may be negotiated if necessary (ie. more information needed). The location will be mutually decided, the main criteria being privacy. Between the interviews, the participants will be asked to keep an informal journal about their school experiences. Portions of their writing will also be included as data if they agree to this request.

APPENDIX G

Parental Consent Form: School District Required Changes

(department letter head)

Consent Form to Parents

Background information to my research:

My name is Phyllis MacLeod. I am a full time graduate student at the University of Victoria in the Faculty of Education. Previous to my enrollment in this programme I was a science teacher in a northern community. I am currently working on my Master's thesis.

The study I am organizing involves the investigation of the school system and its treatment of minority youth, specifically homosexual youth. The data will be collected through interviews. Each participant will be asked to take part in at least two interviews to discuss their thoughts/feelings/opinions on this topic.

The participants can withdraw at any time. All the data collected will be confidential and anonymity will be protected by using code names. The research has been approved by the Office of Research Administration at the University of Victoria. The professor supervising the research is Dr. Brian Harvey, Department of Psychological Foundations in Education.

The resulting information will be instrumental in broadening the understanding of school personnel to the concerns of this minority group within today's schools.

As the parent or guardian of _____, _____ give my consent for them to participate in this study that is aimed at understanding the experiences of homosexual adolescents within high schools.

Date: _____

Name (please print): _____

Signature: _____

VITA

Surname: MacLeod

Given Names: Phyllis Ann

Place of Birth: Baddeck, Nova Scotia, Canada

Educational Institutions Attended:

Dalhousie	1983 to 1984
Camosun	1984 to 1985
University of Victoria	1986 to 1989

Degrees Awarded:

B. Sc.	University of Victoria	1989
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Title of Thesis: Boxing in our youth:Adolescent lesbians speak out about their secondary school experiences.

Author

Phyllis Ann MacLeod

