Ambiguities around Sexuality: An Approach to Understanding Harassment and Bullying of Young People in British Schools

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ABSTRACT. This article is based on a small study undertaken in 2001, which examined the experiences of and responses to sexual harassment and bullying adopted by different professionals (teachers, education social workers, youth workers and a school nurse) and by young people (12 to 25-year-olds). It draws together some of the literature relating to young people and sexuality, the main results and themes of the study, and ideas about ambiguity around sexuality in British secondary schools. The author explores six key themes: language, bullying, sex education, compulsory heterosexuality visibility/invisibility and ambiguity. Applying Mary Douglas' notions of pollution and danger, the author shows how they provide a new perspective for understanding the harassment and bullying of young women and men, offering an explanation for the ambiguities and dissonance that professionals and young people experience in relation to violence in their schools.

Like most adults, many professionals find it especially difficult to deal with sexual matters around children and young people (Allen, 2007; Leech & Trotter, 2005; Mallon, 1998; Ryan, 2000; Warwick, Chase, Aggleton, & Sanders 2004). Accordingly, those who are concerned with the lives of young people offer limited services in this area (Balen & Crawshaw, 2006; Ingham & Aggleton, 2006; Stonewall Scotland, 2003; Tisdall, Kay, Cree, & Wallace, 2004) and, based on the few studies that asked them, young people seem unable to understand or accept sex education and related services being offered (Nixon & Givens, 2004; Sharpe, 2002; Trotter, 2000; Valentine, Skelton, & Butler, 2003). This seems to be especially so in Britain where, despite a number of recent advances in lesbian and gay rights, conservative arguments persist about morality in education, sexuality in schools, and homosexuality in the curriculum (Halstead & Reiss, 2003; Measor, Tiffin, & Miller, 2000; Renold, 2005).

Adults continue to prohibit and constrain young persons' sexual behaviours, sexual inquisitiveness, and sexual identities in a string of ineffective and contradictory policies (Coleman & Carter, 2006; Howard-Barr, Rienzo, Pigg, & James, 2005; Weyman & Davey, 2004). For example, despite continuing concerns about the rates of 'teenage pregnancies' and sexually transmitted diseases amongst young people, there are restrictions on advertisements which prevent condoms being advertised on TV before 9pm (Independent Advisory Group on Sexual Health and HIV, 2007).

Schools, where extensive constraints and prohibitions are placed on young people, are one of the only places in society where sexual relationships are both constantly and strenuously discouraged or obstructed (Harne, 2000; Prout, 2000) *and* simultaneously saturated with the myth of "happy heterosexuality' (Epstein, O'Flynn, & Telford, 2002). Schools are also places where many young people suffer from, witness, or participate in sexual bullying or harassment (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Phoenix,

Frosh, & Pattman, 2003; Thurlow, 2003). Young women are especially likely to have to endure sexual or sexist harassment, and young gay men and lesbians are particularly (though not exclusively) likely to experience homophobic bullying (Buston & Hart, 2001; Epstein, 1996; Harris, 1998; Hillier & Harrison, 2004, Trotter, 2006).

Homophobic bullying of young people has been documented in the United Kingdom for well over 20 years (Trenchard & Warren, 1984). More recent research continues to suggest that many young lesbians and gay men have experienced a violent attack (Harber, 2004; Mason & Palmer, 1996), and even greater numbers have endured belongings stolen, being ostracised, being ridiculed in front of others, being frightened by a look or stare and, most commonly, being called names (Rivers, 2000). Such persistent harassment and bullying affect young people's academic achievements, health, school attendance, and social competence (Dodds, Keogh, & Hickson, 2005; Rivers, 2006; Saulnier, 1998).

Young heterosexual people also face difficulties with homophobic bullying as they witness or are involved in the harassment and bullying of others, or are themselves targeted (and correctly or incorrectly identified) as lesbian or gay (Tomsen & Mason, 2001). For example, two 17 year olds talk about the experiences of some of their heterosexual friends:

Rachel: Jamie's lot used to get tortured didn't they?

Craig: Called a 'puff' yeah. (Trotter, 2006, p.294).

A great deal of these activities and their consequences are ignored by teachers, social workers, and other professionals with responsibilities for young people (Kenway & Willis, 1998; Logan, 2001; Wragg, 2005). Many professionals regard children and young people as "pre-sexual" or "non-sexual" "innocents" (Gittins, 1998; O'Connell

Davidson, 2005), and many health and social care services only treat young people in the context of "family" and sexual issues, which are then usually allocated to the realm of the adults/parents (Hardman, 1997).

Other reasons why professionals and social services fail to meet young people's sexual needs, particularly those of sexual minority youth, are political and pragmatic. In the UK, Section 28 (of the Local Government Act 1988) banned the "promotion" of homosexuality by local authorities. Although it was finally repealed in Scotland (in 2000) and in England and Wales (in 2003), it undoubtedly contributed to an atmosphere of intimidation amongst workers and in the agencies employing them during those 15 years (Gentleman, 1998; Hall, 2001).[1]

Currently, what young people are taught in British schools about sexuality and sexual relationships is regulated by the Department for Education & Skills and the National Curriculum. These regulations emphasise the social, moral, and emotional aspects of mainly heterosexual relationships and citizenship and require secondary schools to include biological facts about human reproduction, information on contraception and abortion, emotional and ethical dimensions, and education about HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections. The existence of and worries about AIDS has meant that negative aspects of homosexuality have been presented in schools and concerns about reproduction, ranging from unplanned pregnancies and sexual abstinence and delayto contraception and abortion have generally left unmet the concerns of lesbian and gay students.

Recently however, some of these negative messages have been replaced at national and official levels, with policy guidance addressing legislation (Home Office, 2000) and challenging bullying and homophobia (Fiddy & Hamilton, 2004; Jennett, 2004; O'Loan,

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[1] This was despite the fact that local authorities had not been directly responsible for sex education in schools since 1986 and so, technically, were never actually "banned' or prevented. Indeed, no case was ever brought against a local authority for infringement of Section 28.

McMillan, Motherwell, Bell, & Arshad, 2006). Recent UK legislation (such as the 2003 Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations and the Equality Act 2006) and government initiatives (such as *Every Child Matters*, the Making a Difference campaign and the National Healthy School Standard) have attempted to ensure greater equality, inclusion and respect for diversity (Warwick, Chase, & Aggleton, 2004). Such documents indicate a shift in legislation. Further, the newly established Commission for Equality & Human Rights (CEHR) will likely, for the first time, offer legal protection to Britain's lesbian, gay, and bisexual population. It may also be expected that such protection will eventually reach those who are younger, perhaps eventually ensuring equal funding for lesbian and gay youth groups.

METHODOLOGY

Participant and non-participant observation, audio-taped individual and semi-structured group interviews were used in this study. Participant observation undertaken during a six-month work placement with the Education Department (as a social worker) provided a great deal of information about the field and also facilitated introductions and achieved some measure of recognition and respect for the research project. This time was also used to gain research permission and access, and to secure ethical and parental consent. The youth workers sought parental consent for those young people who were under 18. Letters were hand-delivered to mothers and fathers (who were known to the workers) and queries and comments were responded to in person.

Subsequently, eight formally arranged non-participant observation sessions were undertaken in the two participating schools (in corridors, reception areas and at a school disco) and provided the researcher with more concentrated opportunities to observe pupils, teachers, administrative and ancillary staff, parents, and other visitors to the school. This information was recorded in research notes.

Following this, and over a further period of six months, 16 individual interviews with school staff (headteachers, teachers, and the school nurse) and other professionals (social workers and youth workers) collected more detailed and specific information about adults' experiences relating to sexuality in schools (Table 1).

Table one: School Staff – Age and Gender

	Male	Female	Total
Headteacher	2	-	2
School nurse	-	1	1
Teacher	4	4	8
Social worker	1	2	3
Youth worker	-	2	2
Total	7	9	16

Group interviews with 19 young people, (some of whom had left and some were still attending school) supplied additional comparative information about experiences relating to sexuality (Table 2).

Table two: Student Group – Age and Gender

	Male	Female	Total
12-13yr olds ('Youth Club')	4	3	7
16-21yr olds ('Leavers' Club')	2	2	4
18-25yr olds ('Young Gay Men's Group')	8	-	8
Total	14	5	19

On the whole, the genders of the participants were accidental and other attributes (such as race or religion or class) were also distributed by chance. Apart from the eight 18-25 year olds from the Young Gay Men's Group, the sexualities of the other 27 participants were unspecified.

Although most of the original aims of this study were achieved, it failed to include one crucial dimension. Despite sexuality being a central theme of this research, and the experiences of young lesbians and gay men being the main focus, lesbian voices were not represented in the data. However, many of the findings from this study support and corroborate work done by others in this area that also lament the under-representation of lesbian voices (Curtin, 2002; McDermott, 2004; Taulke-Johnson, 2006).

An iterative qualitative approach (Strauss, 1987) was employed in the data analysis. The audiotaped interviews and notes were transcribed by the researcher and then analysed using thematic content analysis with NUD.IST software. Burnard's (1991) 14 stages of analysis were followed to aid the description and interpretation of the data, where chunks of text are taken and labelled under certain categories, enabling later retrieval and analysis (Joffe & Yardley, 2004).

RESULTS AND ANALYSES

Six inter-related themes were identified through data analysis: language, bullying, sex education, compulsory heterosexuality, visibility/invisibility, and ambiguity. All but the last theme has also been found by other researchers.

Language

Firstly, as others sometimes have interpreted the language used by young men (Muir & Seitz, 2004; Renold, 2002), there was evidence here in conversation with Youth Club members of using language as a form of violence to establish and maintain their reputations:

Craig: Nipple twisters.

Joanne: Shut up.

Craig: Where you grab the end of the nipples, twist it.

Daniel: Nipple twist a lot.

Maggie: It's all the third year[2] lads, mostly.

This exchange also illustrates an added dimension in that the young men are speaking in front of, and perhaps also for the benefit of, young women. They are describing men's violence to women and, in their repeated defiance of Joanne's request to stop, seem intentionally to maximise the young women's discomfort. Correspondingly, language used by young women has been interpreted as an attempt to reclaim some of the control from young men (Kehily, 2002; Renold, 2002). Rachel, a member of the Leaver's Club, shows this as she says, "I used to say 'heterosexual'-but that was to be clever when one of the lads said 'Hey you're lesbian.' I'd say, 'No actually I'm heterosexual,' and they'd be thinking 'What's it mean?'"

"Insult exchanges," gossip, and greetings were also found to be "cultural routines," that are normal and everyday occurrences providing group cohesiveness or sense of belonging (Buston & Hart, 2001; Plummer, 2001; Thurlow, 2001).

Lizzie: And you nipped my bum.

Craig: I did not.

Maggie: They talk about the size of your boobs.

Daniel: Whose are the biggest?

John: Maggie's are the biggest.

Maggie: Right, they always pick on me; they call me "big tits".

Craig: You are called "tits" Kirk.

Joanne: Yeah he's called "tits".

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[2] 14 – 15 year olds.

Kirk: Am I?

Craig: Yeah.

Kirk: Eeek!

This excerpt from an exchange of youth club members is interesting in that the conversation is heterosexualised at first, the young men commenting on the size of the young women's breasts. Craig then adds a homosexual dimension by referring to Kirk's nickname 'tits'. Although not explaining this, or referring specifically to Kirk's appearance, Craig associates Kirk with symbols of female sexuality.

Bullying

Bullying was the second theme that emerged from the data . For example, Ian from the Young Gay Men's Group described a situation where

the whole library was packed, and as I was walking out the door I got called a "shit-stabber" and a "queer" and a "puff" and all this... everyday, every time I go to college[3] I have to put up with a lot of names.

Clearly, as has been documented by others (Flowers & Buston, 2001; Harris, 1998), homophobia exists in these schools and anti-lesbian and anti-gay bullying were widespread. In a conversation with teachers interviewed for this study, one remarked: "I was horrified by their attitudes... absolutely stunned by the venom against homosexuality. It was just horrifying and I just couldn't bring them round at all."

Teachers here, as elsewhere (Walton, 2003; Butler, Alpaslan, Strümpher, & Astbury, 2003), were particularly inclined to ignore it. Although many of them did feel that schools should

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[3] 16-18 year olds.

deal with lesbian and gay issues, they felt unable to do so. Another teacher, Kenneth observed, "Their own personal sexuality - we don't discuss that. We don't have a programme for that."

Parallel to these other findings, despite its prevalence, most young people lack the confidence or ability to tell teachers about homophobic bullying (Rutter & Leech, 2006). The young gay men in this study agreed and rarely reported bullying as they felt staff 'turn a blind eye'. Matthew said teachers would dismiss his reports and re-allocate blame "You go and say 'they're picking on me' and teachers say 'it's playground banter' you know, 'go away, stop telling tales' and all that".

Sex Education

The third theme, sex education, was found in this study, as in the literature (Chambers, van Loon & Tincknell, 2004; Wilson, Goodson, Pruitt, Buhi, & Davis-Gunnels, 2005), to emphasise the social, moral, and emotional aspects of relationships and citizenship . Gordon, one of the teachers, illustrated this aspect of his teaching:

> We have children who say I have several girlfriends.... We are not judging them. We are just saying that you need to examine the issues as a whole. You need to look at your moral situation, your emotional and your social.

Further, and parallel to findings from other studies, whatever the context or content of sex education provided, 1.) learning outcomes did not always reflect what had been taught (Stone & Ingham, 2006) and 2.) young people were reluctant to acknowledge their ignorance about any aspect of sexuality (Buston & Wight, 2002). The following exchange between some of the young people in the youth club illustrates both points:

Author: Can you tell me some of the things you learnt in sex education, what do you remember?

Lizzie: But we know everything don't we Jo?

Joanne: Yeah

Maggie: Everyone knows it anyway.

Craig: Everybody knows it all, even my little sister and brother know it all

Author: Know it all? Does everybody agree that you know it all? Do you think most people in your school know it all?

John: I know most of it.

Daniel: He doesn't know what orgasm is.

John: I know what an orgasm is.

Author: Yeah, I'm not asking specifically what you round the table know; I want to know what you think most people know.

Daniel: He doesn't know much. No he doesn't.

Craig: Quiet people don't know much.

Daniel: He's very quiet.

John: We just collect it off other people.

There, too, was a wide gap between the realities of young people's knowledge and experiences, and professionals' ideas about these. "They hear a lot about things on television," stated Elizabeth, one of the youth workers, who explained:

You know and I know it's eleven o clock and twelve o clock before youngsters are going to bed... So they probably have a lot more information than we give them credit for... maybe a lot more information than some of the teachers.

This gap between what young people are exposed to outside of school and what professionals are willing or able to discuss within school has been documented elsewhere in the U.K. (Stonewall, 2005; Warwick, Aggleton, & Douglas, 2001).

Although many young people may have spent a lot of time talking about sexual behaviour and sexualities outside of the school, a great deal of it may have been bluffing, concealing, exaggerating, or minimising (Renold, 2004; Sharpe, 2002) as evidenced by some lack of basic knowledge or terminology among some of the 12 and 13-year-olds in the Youth Club:

Author: How often do you hear the word "heterosexual"?

Craig: What's that?

Daniel: Eh?

Michael: It's a prostitute.

Maggie: Men, dressed up as men?

Mandy: What does it mean?

Author: It means people who have preference for close relationships with people of the opposite sex.

Craig: Oh like lemons.

Daniel: Like men dressed up as women.

Craig: What does it mean?

Compulsory Heterosexuality

Another theme that emerged, paralleling the findings from other studies (Phoenix, Frosh, & Pattman, 2003; Renold, 2003), is compulsory heterosexuality. Participants in both

the Young Gay Men's Group and in the Leavers' Club highlighted the pervasiveness of heterosexuality in the school curriculum. Richard and Paul explained:

Richard: It was all... it was very heterosexual, very heterosexual

Paul: Yeah, specially... biology or anything like that... always referred to the heterosexual... never homosexual.

Similarly, Rachel and Bianca from the Leavers' Club, observed:

Rachel: Sex was always brought over as how to make a baby; it was never brought over as an enjoyment.

Bianca: Yeah, definitely.

Visibility/Invisibility

The next theme from this data analysis was visibility and invisibility. For example, despite the increasing visibility of sexuality in society in recent years (Hillier & Harrison, 2004; Trotter, 2001), there was little evidence of any corresponding increase in the visibility of younger lesbian and gay people in the school. One teacher, Mary, thought "perhaps it's something that comes up more once they leave school maybe... I'm not aware of any great problems about it. But then I wouldn't expect there to be either... why should I?"

Concealment continues to be one strategy used by lesbian and gay students (Besner & Spungin, 1997). Rachel, one of the Leavers' Club members, said: "I think if there was anyone in our year who maybe thought they could be gay or lesbian, they hid it extremely well." It is also a strategy thatmany teachers felt compelled to adopt, as they feared career problems, ridicule and isolation from friends (Sparkes, 1994; Sullivan, 1993). When asked if there were any "out" gay teachers in her school, Sarah, the school nurse, responded "no."

What about "parents who are out," she was asked: "No, no, no, honestly, it's a subject, in a comprehensive school, that, if somebody is, they keep it to themselves."

Ambiguity

One theme that was not found elsewhere in the research literature was ambiguity. Results revealed a vast range of contradictory understandings and ambiguous responses. For example, there were differences between teachers' (from the same school) perceptions of the rules about young people touching each other and there were differences between young people's (from the same school) perceptions of the rules about dress codes ranging from skirts/trousers to jewellery/hairstyles.

Similarly, there were differences and also uncertainties and anomalies about perceptions of what was taught and learnt in schools. Young people, for instance, sometimes implied that they were taught a wide range of sexual issues and given a great deal of detailed information. At other times, they lamented the lack of any details and the exclusive focus on heterosexuality.

There was also some confusion around invisibility. Youth workers and education social workers were aware of young gay men in schools; two of them had experiences of working with them. They also acknowledged the existence of young lesbians. Some of the teachers, however, were not aware of young lesbians or gay men in their schools or of any homophobia. Most of the young people (with the exception of the Young Gay Men's group) were also not aware of any young lesbians or gay men in school. Yet, they were all aware of (and some of them participated in or witnessed) considerable amounts of homophobic graffiti, harassment, and bullying.

This notion of ambiguity points to the importance of Mary Douglas (1966) ideas. And, her

analyses of social rituals and rules about pollution and danger provide an invaluable perspective for thinking about and understanding the harassment and bullying of young lesbians and gay men in schools as she is particularly interested in the meanings and function of rules and rituals.

In this study, participants showed persistent cynicism and described minor rule breaking to school rules and rituals. The conversation within the Leaver's Club demonstrates these challenges:

Rachel: We got a new headmaster didn't we? And it was really, really like-no trainers, shirt tucked in, no rings or anything.

Bianca: Our rings are like quite biggish ones, so we used to turn them round didn't we? So that... they're flat. Or... you could see a teacher come so you'd take them all off and hide them until they went.

Paul: Mmmm. You're supposed to, but you just walk past a teacher and they say ...

Bianca: "Tuck your shirt in!'

Paul: Or whatever.

However, according to Douglas (1966), such challenges, often in the form of persistent cynicism or minor rule breaking, might become unmanageable without some mechanism or scapegoat for diverting attention and re-focusing blame. One way of protecting school rules and rituals from skepticism and collapse is to identify someone (or some group) as an "enemy" who "is continually undoing' their "good effect[s]' (p.174).

Culpability and censure can, therefore, be redirected from sexist or homophobic individuals or institutions onto lesbians and gay men. For example, it could be implied that it is not patriarchy or men or teachers who are blamed for illogical rules about

skirts/trousers, jewellery/hairstyles, holding hands/kissing, lesbians and gay men are to be blamed. What lesbians and gay men represent, or at least what their imagined behaviors and lifestyles represent, is a threat to the harmony and decorum of the school. If they are present, they are dangerous and need to be identified and ejected.

Even if they are not visible or if they are rendered invisible they remain a threat. Applying Douglas' ideas therefore, it is suggested that the existence of lesbians and gay men threatens to pollute the patriarchal/heterosexual atmosphere of the school, and no matter how conforming in appearance, acquiescent in behavior or achieving in academic terms, they are always a danger. "A polluting person is always in the wrong" having "crossed some line" and this wrongdoer upsets the status quo and "unleashes some danger for someone" (Douglas, 1966, p.113).

In this context, despite the relative advances in visibility of lesbians and gay men in society, Sarah's vantage point as a school nurse working with teenagers for 12 years is less surprising:

never, ever had anyone openly come out and say... I don't think it happens really until they're over sixteen. I mean we had one boy here who-as soon as he left school, as soon as he left school, grew his hair, handbag, makeup, the lot. But while he was in school...

Schools, and those within them, must therefore spend a great deal of time and effort identifying these dangerous individuals in order that they can be ejected, and safety and harmony restored. Sorting out who "they" are (and therefore, by definition, who others are not) by classifying ideas, values, behaviors, and appearances, is a complex business. In order to gain some consensus, it must be done publicly. However, again applying Douglas' ideas, because this classification is rehearsed in public, to

ensure some standardization of basic categories, it has authority. Categories and classifications are re-established and re-affirmed daily and, since everyone is persuaded to agree because of the agreement of others, they are easily maintained. However, because it is so public, the classifications and categories are rigid.

Examples of such rigid categorizations were found in the data. For example, "masculine girls," described as "beat[ing] hell" out of other young people or dressing in "a masculine way" and "feminine boys," described as "vulnerable … small" or having a "pony tail." Similarly, predatory lesbians, described as repeatedly "trying it on" and un-sporting gay men for not joining in with the other young men. Classifications and comparisons, particularly between young men and women, were prevalent.

These examples of definitions and stereotypes immediately reveal the anomalies and ambiguities that were expressed throughout the interviews. Although young women were sometimes "pushy" and aggressive, this could be interpreted as acceptable-they were being assertive and defending themselves from sexist and aggressive young men. Despite some young men being weak and timid, this may be due to their high intelligence or some illness.

Douglas argues that such anomalies and ambiguities are to be expected in any society, and social or cultural provisions are always made for dealing with them. Participants in this study clearly provided four ways of dealing with anomalies and ambiguities.

The first mechanism is the one described in the examples above, providing optional alternative explanations "by settling for one or other interpretation, ambiguity is often reduced" (Douglas, 1966, p.39). The second method of dealing with disagreement and disorder arising from anomalies in society is by physically controlling them (for example through legislation and imprisonment, and, in this context, also through school

rules and punishments). As this study has shown, Section 28 and other governmental procedures succeeded in silencing gay men and lesbians and outlawing sexuality issues from the school curriculum, and many of the professionals in this study still felt constrained by this legislation — despite its repeal. Thirdly, anomalies and ambiguities can be dealt with by avoiding them; teachers did not discuss sexuality, the school nurse did not consider sexuality, and the education social workers concerned themselves with other matters.

Finally, as already discussed, Douglas argues that ambiguity is managed in society by labeling certain behaviors as dangerous. The production and maintenance of such notions, she argues, are fuelled by individuals' desire to reduce the anxiety they feel when faced with ambiguity. Such public beliefs are more likely to be produced in the course of "reducing dissonance between general and individual interpretations" (Douglas, 1966, p.39).

Examples of such types of dissonance are clear in this study. How can gay men be dangerous when they are also weak and timid? How can lesbians pose a threat to society when, legally, they don't exist? How can we teach young people that heterosexual relationships are the best when there is so much domestic violence and such a high divorce rate?

Ideas about pollution go some way to answering these questions. According to Douglas, pollution ideas are adaptive and protective in order to protect society from unpalatable knowledge. They protect a system of ideas, which rely on publicly agreed classifications, from challenge. Therefore gay men and lesbians must be regarded as dangerous polluters in order to protect and prevent us from seeing that heterosexual men (and the patriarchal system they embody) are the real danger.

IMPLICATIONS

Douglas' theories about ambiguities and dissonance offer some explanation for the homophobic harassment and bullying that the professionals and young people experienced. This explanation could provide a more coherent and useful context for professional practice in schools. Douglas' ideas about pollution and danger suggest that professionals could consider minimizing negative messages and exploring diversity, and incorporate lesbian and gay issues in their qualifying and on-going training. Education social workers and school nurses might accept that healthy and happy young lesbians and gay men do exist; their so-called problems are often socially constructed and assigned by others. Youth workers might understand and explore young people's tendency to categorize and ridicule each other as a way of reducing their anxieties about the ambiguities that adults present them with. If professionals could help young people to resist stereotypical classifications and tolerate ambiguities around gender and sexuality, harassment, and bullying in schools may be greatly reduced.

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