

## **Heteronormativity in Online Information about Sex: A South Australian Case Study**

Damien W. Riggs, School of Social and Policy Studies, Flinders University

### **Abstract**

Whilst sex education in Australia has moved beyond a focus solely on abstinence, it is still in many instances shaped by what Silin (1995) refers to as the ‘silences’ that accompany topics considered unspeakable to young people. The present paper focuses specifically on one such silence, namely the representation of non-heterosexual sexualities and non-gender normative people in the context of sex education. By focusing on three South Australian websites that act as first ports of call in terms of information about sex and sex education to young people and their parents, the analysis provided suggests that two of the three websites evoke a range of heteronormative and gender normative assumptions, with one of these sites more explicitly emphasising reproductive heterosex, and the other adopting a liberal approach that nonetheless fails to adequately challenge stereotypes about non-heterosexuality and non-gender normativity. The third site, by contrast, provides relatively progressive inclusion of a range of genders and sexualities, and addresses homophobia and its effects. The paper concludes by suggesting that websites providing information about sex to young people and their parents must make a substantive shift away from perpetuating the silencing of marginal sexualities and genders, and towards contributing to open public discussion about young people and sex.

This is an Author's Accepted Manuscript of an article published in *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 14, 72-80. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/ciec.2014.14.1.72>

## **Introduction**

Contestations over what should be taught in sex education are typically framed by moral claims over what is purportedly ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ for young people. Those on the Christian right primarily advocate for a restrictive approach to sex education, one that emphasises the ‘innocence’ of young people (founded on the claim that the ‘innocence’ of young people is under threat when sex education contains anything other than information about procreative heterosex within the confines of marriage). Those who argue for a more liberal approach to sex education, by contrast, typically argue for the rights of young people to information about a much broader range of topics, and suggest that this breadth of coverage is necessary to ensure that young people make informed choices about sex. Yet following Silin (1995), it could be suggested that whilst these two approaches may at first glance appear entirely oppositional, they by and large operate within one given discursive sphere in relation to young people, namely one constituted by three key assumptions: 1) that young people are passive recipients of knowledge about sex, 2) that heterosexuality is the normative developmental outcome (albeit the liberal approach recognizes sexual ‘diversity’), and 3) that information about sex should be meted out to young people on a need to know basis at developmentally appropriate increments. As Silin’s work would suggest, these three assumptions perpetuate silences about topics considered taboo for young people (specifically non-heterosexuality and non-gender normativity), as well as denying children’s agency.

This paper seeks to explore in detail the silences produced by both the ‘restrictive’ and ‘liberal’ approaches described above by exploring how non-heterosexual and/or non-gender normative people are represented on three South Australian websites that provide information about sex to young people and their parents. The utility of South Australian websites as a case

study arises from the state's history of introducing changes to sex education curriculum that have evoked strong reactions from the Christian right (Jose, 1999; Peppard, 2008), but which have nonetheless resulted in incremental gains toward a more representative and wide-reaching curriculum. The latest in this history occurred in 2003, when a new programme trialed at the time was met with considerable vocal opposition. Despite this, the programme has since been made available to South Australian schools, though two other service providers also exist within the State. Comparing the information that these three service providers make available on their websites thus provides an opportunity to examine, almost ten years down the track, how public information about sex education in South Australia remains to a certain degree mired in a normative understanding of what constitutes the 'right' information for young people, as well as highlighting the comparatively progressive information provided on the website of the service that developed the new programme in 2003.

It is important to note, however, that this paper is not an examination of the programmes themselves (see Hiller and Mitchell 2008 for evaluations of other programmes), nor does it seek in any depth to consider why revisions to sex education programmes in South Australia have evoked such vociferous responses (the latter concerns have been addressed extensively elsewhere, see Gibson 2007; Jose 1999; Peppard 2008). The focus of this paper, instead, is on the three South Australia websites as it is suggested here that these websites provide a very specific window into the public face of the differing approaches currently adopted in South Australia in terms of sex education. Whilst it could be argued that, in an age of global information sharing, the context-specificity of the sites is potentially irrelevant, it is instead suggested here that the sites are typically made known to both young people and their parents through information addressed specifically to South Australian children and parents, and thus although people from

other locales may access the information, it is both primarily targeted at South Australian consumers and likely utilised by this population.

Furthermore, whilst it could be argued that the website are simply the public face of sex education providers and information services (and hence reflect nothing of how the actual programmes are run or how the information provided is interpreted by viewers), it is suggested here that the information provided on the websites is readily accessible to parents, and as such the websites offer a first port of call in regards to information about each of the programmes. Moreover, the information provided on the websites is accessible to young people, who research suggests are more likely to use the internet than any other source to get information about sex (Hiller and Mitchell 2008). In terms of young people themselves, whilst the websites are not age-specific *per se*, information about the sites is circulated to children and their parents for children aged six and upwards (as will be outlined further in the paper), hence the relevance of the analysis presented in this paper to young people.

In terms of Silin's work (e.g., 1995), and utilizing a discourse analytic framework as applied in previous research to examining heteronormativity and gender normativity (e.g., Braun, 2000; Land and Kitzinger, 2005; Peel, 2000; Speer and Potter, 2000), the focus in this paper is on how heteronormativity (i.e., the default presumption that all people, including children, are heterosexual) and gender normativity (i.e., the presumption that any individual's gender identity and behaviours align with the norms assumed for their natally-assigned sex) - as often subtly reproduced on the sites - hold the potential to silence knowledge about non-heterosexual and/or non-gender normative people. Further, the paper considers the terms on which inclusion is offered to groups marginalised on the basis of sex and/or gender, and considers the implications

of this in terms of how sites could be more inclusive of non-heterosexual and/or non-gender normative people.

### **The Function of Sex Education**

Before undertaking an analysis of the websites, it is first important to further explicate some of the claims made in the introduction in regard to the regulatory role of sex education. Whilst Australia has a national framework for the provision of sex education in public schools, inclusion of sex education is not a mandatory aspect of school curricula (Hillier and Mitchell 2008). Furthermore, what is included is at the discretion of each individual school, with schools typically taking their lead from the school governing council (which is driven largely by the views of parents). In this respect, what gets included in sex education courses is primarily shaped by parent's opinions of what children should and shouldn't know.

Of course parents are not the only gatekeepers between young people and information about sex. Teachers are largely instructed, both implicitly and explicitly, to monitor and control the information made available to young people. In some instances this need for monitoring may be promoted in order to keep teachers safe from accusations (i.e., of inappropriate behaviours in regard to young people), whilst in other situations it may be on the stated basis of keeping children 'safe' from 'inappropriate information' (i.e., in recent concerns over the 'sexualisation' of young people). As such, and with reference to both Silin (1995) and Robinson's (2005; 2008) extensive work on the education of young people, it may be suggested that an investment in a normative understanding of 'childhood innocence' centrally informs sex education, with claims to 'protecting' young people from harm in reality operating to reassert heterosexuality as the only acceptable sexuality. For example, and as both authors suggest, the constant evocation of

‘the predatory homosexual’ in discussions about what should be included in sex education functions to posit information about reproductive heterosex as the only necessary information for young people.

Sitting alongside parents’ and teachers’ role in maintaining prohibitions on what is included in sex education are current pedagogical approaches centered upon ‘emergent curriculum’, which provide another means through which a purported focus on children and their voices actually serves to gatekeep information. Surtees (2008) suggests that when everyday teaching practices claim to be developed primarily from the questions posed by children, by default established norms and indeed practices of dominance will continue to hold sway. Furthermore, if teachers are permitted, or indeed encouraged, to focus primarily upon heterosexuality in their teaching (either implicitly by the focus on particular topics or explicitly in sex education), then gatekeeping is again at work in closing down the topics available for conversation. Children are adept at interpreting what can and cannot be asked, and will likely shape their questions in response to the broader contexts made intelligible to them in the classroom (Blaise 2010; Chapman and Wright 2008).

Research suggests that the effects of gatekeeping (whether intentional or otherwise) from the three sources outlined above are multiple, and negative not just for those students located at the margins. Findings from a large scale Australian study (Hillier, Turner and Mitchell 2005) suggest that homophobia is still a powerful force within Australian schools, with significant negative consequences for all students. For same-sex attracted youth, homophobia functions to silence and marginalize their experiences and desires, which can result in serious mental health consequences including an increased likelihood of self-harm. For opposite-sex attracted youth, the representation of only a relatively narrow range of acceptable masculinities and femininities

can equally be damaging in its capacity to close down a range of gendered identities and to reinforce power inequities between young men and women. As such, the education system is complicit in ongoing homophobia and gender normativity by failing to provide adequate coverage of a range of sexual and gender expressions. Thus, and counter to claims by the religious right, education about sexual diversity does not cause homosexuality. Rather, a lack of education causes homophobia. Failing to address the needs of a diverse range of people in sex education both contributes to the silencing of non-heterosexual and/or non-gender normative young people as much as it endorses the practices of that silencing (i.e., both implicit disapproval and explicit violence). In this sense, addressing homophobia and including a wide range of sexualities and genders in sex education *from the beginning* would be a much more proactive approach, rather than attempting with older children to challenge already established and entrenched negative stereotypes (Sapp 2010).

It is of course important to consider precisely how inclusion is enacted in regard to any topic presented as part of sex education. Again, research suggests that whilst coverage of issues pertaining to same-sex attracted youth is typically minimal – as one of Hiller and Mitchell’s (2008) young gay participants suggest; ‘it was as useful as a chocolate kettle’ – opposite-sex attracted students do not necessarily fare any better (Allen 2004). Coverage of heterosex typically employs anatomical diagrams, and reduces bodily desires to their constitutive parts (i.e., sperm, eggs, penises, vaginas). Contrarily, coverage of non-heterosexuality and/or gender diversity typically shies away from coverage of functionality, and instead focuses on identities. Both of these approaches, albeit in differing ways, fail to address young people as sexual beings, and potentially contribute to the lack of information about their own bodies, and the wide range of ways in which they may experience themselves. For example, a focus on functionality

typically only serves to enshrine one type of function (penetrative heterosex), thus endorsing it as much as setting it up as an object of anxiety (i.e., making it all about performance, pain, risk and danger), whilst a focus on identities may fail to address the needs of young people in the process of comprehending their bodies. Furthermore, and for same-sex attracted youth, opportunities for inclusion at present appear to be limited to domestication (i.e., that non-heterosexual and/or non-gender normative people present themselves as ‘just like’ heterosexual/gender normative people), thus again failing to open a space for young people to explore what their developing sexualities, bodies and sense of self mean.

### **The Websites**

The websites under examination in this paper first came to my attention when my then six year old child brought home a flyer from his South Australian public school advertising a sex education night available to students and parents of the school, hosted by *Family Life SA* (FLSA). I thought at the time this was a progressive move on the part of the school, offering this service to parents and children at such a young age. When I visited the website of FLSA (which was listed on the flyer), however, and as outlined below, I was quite concerned about the information provided on the site, and wondered what it would mean to other parents (and indeed their children) who potentially viewed the site. Suffice it to say, we did not attend the session on offer. One year later, another of my children, who at the time was 8, brought home a flyer from his catholic school informing parents that the school would be undertaking introductory ‘human development’ classes with children, facilitated by staff from *Shine SA* (SSA). I again accessed the website listed on the flyer, and was heartened to see that SSA appeared to promote a more inclusive approach to sex education. Having mentioned these two experiences to a class of

education students I was teaching one day, it became apparent to me that more closely examining these websites would be a productive way of assessing the information most readily available to primary-aged children and their parents in South Australia, namely through the public faces of sex education programmes (i.e., their websites). When I mentioned this to friends who were educators, I was advised that some schools also use the *Children, Youth and Women's Health* (CYWH) website to direct children and parents to in terms of sex education. Thus my decision to examine this third website. I think sought to determine if there were any other service providers whose remit included the provision of information about sex to young people and their parents, and could not identify any other such services in South Australia. Hence the focus of this paper is solely on the three websites named above, and the information contained within them throughout the month of July 2011.

The analysis presented below both outlines in broad strokes the contents of each site, before then discussing in details aspects of each site that are either inclusive or exclusive or non-heterosexual and/or non-gender normative people. In focusing on each site in turn, the intention is not to create a hierarchy of inclusivity *per se*, but rather to examine the different ways in which each site represents or refers to a range of expressions of sexuality and gender, and to consider what the rhetorical effects of these might be in terms of both parents and children who access the sites. As such, the analysis makes no claims about how the websites are interpreted by viewers, nor the intentions of the organisations who provide the information. Rather, the analysis examines the websites as texts that are potentially framed by broader heteronormative and gender normative understandings of sex, and by broader assumptions about the 'correct' information for young people.

## **Analysis**

### ***Children, Youth and Women's Health (CYWH) Website***

The *Children, Youth and Women's Health* website offers by far the most comprehensive coverage of the three sites, addressing a range of topics including sexual development, parents 'coping' with young people coming out, and providing general information to both parents (and potentially young people) about sexuality. Yet starting with the information provided under the page heading of 'sexuality', it is possible to see how a relatively normative image of young people's sexualities is represented. Whilst the page starts off by stating "Sexuality is a combination of people's sex, their sexual feelings for others, their feelings about themselves as sexual beings, their sexual orientation and their sexual behavior", and whilst the page then goes on to provide a range of definitions including one for heterosexuality, the general information that follows focuses solely on opposite-sex attracted youth, whilst the 'myths' section focuses almost exclusively on same-sex attracted youth. For example, the 'discovering your sexuality' section opens up by talking about the changes that come with puberty, and then provides the following example: "when you were a young girl you might have hated all the boys at school, just because they were boys. But now you are feeling an attraction to boys". This is the first example on the page, and indeed only example provided in the broad section about developmental changes. The page then moves on to comment specifically about 'GLBTIQ' youth, thus implicitly denoting the general sexual development topic as being about nominally heterosexual youth, with non-heterosexual and/or non-gender normative youth configured as fundamentally outside of the general category of 'youth and sexuality'. This is further exemplified by the definition of 'GLBTIQ': The term "is used to try and be inclusive of all of

these 'alternative' sexualities". Here, again, heterosexuality is the assumed norm to which 'GLBTIQ' youth are depicted as the 'alternative'.

In the 'myths' section that follows, six of the seven questions are about non-heterosexuality, even though there is no framing provided to suggest that these are 'myths about GLBTIQ people'. Furthermore, the responses to the 'myths' are homogenizing of non-heterosexual and/or non-gender normative people, such as combating the myth that 'GLBTIQ people are only a small percentage of the population' with the claim that "10% of the population is same-sex attracted". This focus on same-sex sexual attraction fails to say anything about the experiences of BTIQ people *per se*. Other myth responses suggest that some non-heterosexual people 'act like stereotypes' "because they want to be known as same sex attracted or in rebellion of traditional sex roles"; claim that same-sex attraction is natural because "Any animal, including the human species, is capable of responding to homosexual stimuli"; and refute the 'myth' that same-sex relationships don't last with the statement "They are relationships just like any other, and like any other, some last and some do not". These three myths offer complex and contradictory accounts of non-heterosexuality that, if anything, only reinforce heterosexuality as the norm as well as providing a negative view of non-heterosexuality. So, for example, we see justification for negative stereotypes because, in essence, 'same-sex attracted people like them', we see homosexuality described in terms of animality, and we see same-sex relationships domesticated under the liberal claim of being 'just like any other' (where again the comparison is to an unnamed heterosexuality).

Shifting to the CYWH page on 'young people who are gay or lesbian', the heteronormativity underpinning the website become even more visible. The page starts off by telling parents 'what they feel' when a child comes out: "Learning that your son or daughter is

gay or lesbian may have come as a sudden surprise, or you may have been wondering for some time about their sexuality. You might be feeling many different things such as shock, disbelief, disappointment, sorrow, guilt or confusion, and even relief. Many parents believe life will be difficult for their child if they are seen as homosexual. Some parents feel they have done something wrong or have failed in some way”. This type of statement mirrors those made within parenting books examined by Riggs (2008), namely that having a child identify as gay or lesbian is presumed to be experienced as a surprise, and indeed a loss, to parents. Such an account not only enshrines heterosexuality as the normatively presumed developmental outcome (otherwise why would being lesbian or gay be a ‘shock’ or ‘sudden surprise’), but also presumes that all parents are heterosexual. These types of claims are not limited to the introductory paragraph however, and this particular page goes on at length to legitimate experiencing a child’s coming out as a loss, a surprise, and as something that must be come to term with. Whilst the page endorses a supportive approach and states that sexuality is not a ‘choice’, it does nothing to challenge the presumption of heterosexuality that underpins these types of responses, nor does it consider a diverse range of expressions of gender or sexuality other than the simplistic categories of ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’. Whilst it could be suggested that these types of standpoints reflect dominant social norms about how young people’s sexualities (and specifically gay and lesbian identities) should be discussed, it is important to keep in mind that as a key point of information websites such as this do as much to reinforce the status quo as they do to mirror it.

### ***Family Life SA (FLSA) Website***

In comparison to the CYWH website, the *Family Life SA* website features a much less inclusive representation of non-heterosexuality and/or non-gender normativity. The website includes a

statement of the FLSA mission, information on available courses, as well as a ‘frequently asked questions’ page which includes a response to the question ‘do you teach homosexuality’, the response being “No. Educators do not teach homosexuality just as they do not teach heterosexuality. We educate all students and in some programmes discuss a number of topics, including homosexuality”. An examination of the website would suggest that the topics in which homosexuality is included relate to the sexual identities of adults or their sexual practices. The positioning of homosexuality only in this way has several negative implications for the website overall. First, if FLSA claims not to teach about any sexuality, and yet homosexuality is only explicitly included in topics on sexual practices (and even then only sparsely), it is fair to state that the remainder of the teaching provided by FLSA is not about homosexuality. This means that their teaching about families, young people, and sexuality is by default primarily about heterosexuality, which runs counter to the claim that FLSA does not teach about heterosexuality. So, for example, when the FLSA website talks of ‘family based evenings’ or ‘teaching children and their caregivers about healthy sexuality’, what in fact they are talking about would appear to be teaching heterosexual families and nominally heterosexual children about sexuality.

This emphasis upon heterosexuality on the FLSA website is further evidenced by the website claim that the FLSA has a “wide range of books and resources available”. An examination of the resources and books referred to indicates no inclusion of books other than those that focus upon heterosexual parenting, and indeed many of the books included have been identified in a study by Riggs (2008) as marginalising of non-heterosexuality. Finally, we can see examples of normativity on the FLSA website in reference to the specific teaching that FLSA provides. The following statement - “this session begins by talking about the family - different families/different mixtures. It goes on to explain conception - egg, sperm, where they come

from, how they get together via sexual intercourse and how the baby is born” – an account of conception that constructs reproduction as inherently heterosexual: that eggs and sperm come together via intercourse, with no reference to other forms of family formation or reproduction. As a result, heterosexuality may be seen to be thoroughly enshrined within the FLSA website. Whilst teaching provided by the FLSA may differ from the website content, it is fair to state, in comparison to the CYWH website, that non-heterosexuality is barely acknowledged (and only in the diminutive ‘homosexuality’) and non-gender normativity is not represented at all.

### ***Shine SA (SSA) Website***

In contrast to both the *Children, Youth and Women’s Health* website and the *Family Life SA* website, the *Shine SA* website presents a much more progressive understanding of sex education that explicitly attends to non-heterosexuality and non-gender normativity in positive ways. This may at least in part be a product of the fact that Shine SA was the organisation in charge of coordinating the 2003 revisions to sex education in South Australia, and now delivers its ongoing implementation. In this regard, the website states that SSA courses teach young people to understand “cultural, sexual and physical diversity”, and the pages of the SSA website include information on many groups, including information pertaining to heterosexual people, non-heterosexual people, white people, Indigenous people, people from non-English speaking backgrounds, able bodied people and people living with disabilities. An example of the information provided on the SSA website related to non-heterosexual and/or non-gender normative people is as follows: Shine SA aims to “provide education about the multiple effects that homophobia has on the sexual health and wellbeing of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people”. Importantly, information on non-heterosexuality appears in many areas of the website,

rather than being restricted to simplistic discussions of sexual practices (as per the FLSA website), and heterosexuality is not presumed to be the only form of reproductive or ‘proper’ form of sexuality. When non-heterosexual and/or non-gender normativity are discussed, this is done in ways that provide an opening to critical thinking about social norms. For example, instead of relying upon fixed identity categories, the website discusses how identity categories operate, and suggests the fluidity of gender and sexuality: “These days, there are increasing numbers of people who wish to keep ‘free’ of fixed labels or categories, not being tied down to ‘hetero, homo, or bi-sexual’ identities but instead choosing something else, ‘whatever’, ‘queer’, ‘non-heterosexual, or same-sex attracted’”. Similarly, when discussing the aetiology of sexuality, the website states “It’s interesting that you rarely hear people looking for a cause for heterosexuality”, thus challenging the assumption of heterosexuality as a norm that doesn’t require consideration.

The SSA website also challenges the presumption within sex education that discussions of puberty or sex must centre upon heterosex. Thus the SSA page on ‘boys and puberty’ focuses on developmental changes, what can be expected, and self care, but does not tie boys’ desires to a heterosexual imperative, nor to penetrative intercourse. Sections on masturbation and wet dreams normalise boys’ desires and bodily experiences without presuming heterosexuality: they allow for a discussion of pleasure and self care without assuming that all boys will identify as opposite-sex attracted. Furthermore, the website provides a focus on homophobia that is not limited to information specific to non-heterosexual people, but is also included in generalist information on the website. For example, a SSA newsletter on teaching sexuality in schools includes a page feature on homophobia, its incidence in schools, and its effects on all young people. Importantly, homophobia is constructed less as an issue that only non-heterosexual

people must address, but rather as something that must be addressed by all of the school community.

As a whole, then, the SSA website provides a non-normalising discussion of sexuality and gender in relation to sex education. Importantly, the website moves beyond liberal inclusivity (where ‘diversity’ in education is constructed as a problem of the other that must justify its existence, see Lovell and Riggs 2009; Riggs and Augoustinos 2007), and towards a thoroughly situated account of sexual and gender identities that is cognisant of the effects of social norms. As a public website, and as a key provider of sex education, SSA is thus relatively progressive in the agenda that it sets for engaging with topics relating to youth sexuality by providing a language in which a diverse range of sexualities and gender can be discussed in ways that are neither domesticating nor pathologising.

## **Conclusion**

In analysing the information available on three South Australian websites in regard to sex and sex education, this paper has sought to explore the public face of sex education in the state, and to consider both how heteronormativity and gender normativity are rendered intelligible (albeit not necessarily intentionally) by some service providers, but also how they are challenged. Importantly, the above analysis has highlighted both some of the explicit ways in which heteronormativity specifically occurs (such as in the FLSA website), but also some of the more subtle forms that heteronormativity takes (such as the stereotyped and homogenising statements made on the CYWH website). Whilst it is unlikely that either the FLSA or CYWH websites intentionally set out to marginalise or offend any particular group of people, it is nonetheless fair to state that both websites function to marginalise non-heterosexuality and non-gender

normativity by constructing heterosexuality as the normative mode of reproduction and sexuality. One implication of this is that if such a position is promoted within the education provided by either organisation, attendees who do not identify as heterosexual may well feel marginalised or excluded. The SSA website, by contrast, appears to engender an understanding of sexuality and gender that would be potentially more likely to be perceived as welcoming by a wide range of people. Whilst, again, we cannot know how education by SSA would look in practice on the basis of an analysis of its website, we can usefully ascertain its position as advocated on its website toward information provision about sexuality.

Although as stated above, the information on the websites analysed here may differ significantly from training or face-to-face information provided by the organisations, websites nonetheless often serve as a first point of contact for many people, and may well be a vital resource for young people. Lyn Harrison and Lynne Hillier (1999) suggest precisely this in their own research on sex education. They suggest that discussing intimacy, erotics, and pleasure with students can often be a challenging task for educators, and can leave educators open to harassment or allegations. Obviously this should not prevent educators from broaching such topics within the ambit of sex education, but websites may play a key role in disseminating information to students within the context of sex education in ways that address many of the issues currently associated with sex education. A summary of the possible role of websites in sex education is now provided.

First, the use of informative and interactive websites could allow parents to play an active role in monitoring what their children are learning, without preventing other parents from making their own choices about what their child learns (i.e., wanting more or less exposure).

Second, websites can be used by children in the privacy of their own homes, thus potentially removing some of the stigma or titillation of sex education in the classroom, both for students and for teachers. Third, websites can introduce students to safe way of making use of the internet as a resource for learning about their bodies, sexuality, and self care. And finally, the use of online spaces as an educative tool for young people may help to facilitate an understanding of gender and sexuality that moves away from the presumption that identities and bodies are fixed and essential (an outcome that is more likely to occur during face-to-face interactions that are reliant upon the individual actions and embodiment of the educator and the examples they provide), and towards one where identities can be viewed as constructed according to a range of social and cultural contexts. Importantly, making this shift would not entail a disembodied approach to sex education *per se* (this would only exacerbate the lack of applicability of sex education to the actual lives of young people), but would rather allow for a much wider range of bodies and sexualities to be presented in potentially non-reductivist ways that avoid the liberal inclusivity of identity politics.

To conclude, and to return to the work of Silin (1995), whilst two of the three websites analysed here may be seen as complicit with the silencing of non-heterosexual and/or non-gender normative young people and/or parents, the third site demonstrates the fact that social and pedagogical change is possible. Such an approach, following Silin, and as seemingly implemented by Shine SA, involves not simply ‘adding on’ representations of non-heterosexual and non-gender normative people, but it more precisely involves recognising 1) that children are sexual beings, 2) that they are active agents in the construction of their life worlds, and 3) that they have the right to information about their lives as well as the lives of those from whom they differ. Whilst it is likely the case that some parents and educators will likely continue to

emphasise a discourse of 'childhood innocence', it is important to continue challenging, as the work of Silin does, the detrimental effects this can have upon children in terms of their awareness of their bodies, and the decisions they make on the basis of this.

---

## References

Allen, L. 2004. Beyond the birds and the bees: Constituting a discourse of erotics in sexuality education. *Gender and Education* 16: 151-167.

Blaise, M. 2010. Kiss and tell: Gendered narratives and childhood sexuality. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood* 35: 2-14.

Braun, V. 2000. Heterosexism in focus group research: Collusion and challenge, *Feminism and Psychology* 10: 133-140.

Chapman, E.L. and C. Wright. 2008. Provision of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) materials for young people in UK public and secondary school libraries. In *Forbidden fruit: The censorship of literature and information for young people*, ed. Sarah McNicol, 19-40. Boca Raton: BrownWalker Press.

Gibson, S. 2007. The language of the right: Sex education debates in South Australia. *Sex Education* 7: 239-250.

Harrison, L. and L. Hillier. 1999. What should be the 'subject' of sex education?". *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 20: 279-288.

Hillier, L. and A. Mitchell. 2008. 'It was as useful as a chocolate kettle': Sex education in the lives of same-sex attracted young people in Australia. *Sex Education* 8: 211-224.

Hillier, L, A. Turner and A. Mitchell. 2005. *Writing themselves in again: 6 years on*. Melbourne: Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health, and Society.

- Jose, J. 1999. Drawing the line: Sex education and homosexuality in South Australia, 1985. *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 45: 197-213.
- Land, V. and Kitzinger, C. 2005 Speaking as a lesbian: Correcting the heterosexist presumption, *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 38: 371-416.
- Lovell, J. and D.W. Riggs. 2009. Constructions of difference in children's storybooks and their implication in bullying behaviour. In *The racial politics of bodies, nations and knowledges*, eds. Barbara Baird and Damien W. Riggs, 155-175. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press.
- Peel, E. 2001. Mundane heterosexism: Understanding incidents of the everyday, *Women's Studies International Forum* 24: 541-554.
- Peppard, J. 2008. Culture wars in South Australia: The sex education debates. *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 43: 499-515.
- Riggs, D.W. 2008. All the boys are straight: Heteronormativity in books on fathering and raising boys. *Thymos: Journal of Boyhood Studies* 2: 186-202
- Riggs, D.W. and M. Augoustinos. 2007. Learning difference: Representations of diversity in storybooks for children of lesbian and gay parents. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* 3: 81-95.
- Robinson, K.N. 2005. 'Queering' gender: Heteronormativity in early childhood education. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood* 30: 111-123.
- Robinson, K.N. 2008. In the name of 'childhood innocence': A discursive exploration of the moral panic associated with childhood and sexuality. *Cultural Studies Review* 14: 113-129.
- Sapp, J. 2010. A review of gay and lesbian themed early childhood children's literature. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood* 35: 32-40.

Silin, J.G. 1995. *Sex, Death and the Education of Children: Our Passion for Ignorance in the Age of AIDS*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Speer, S.A. and Potter, J. 2000. The management of heterosexist talk: Conversational resources and prejudiced claims, *Discourse and Society* 11: 543-572.

Surtees, N. 2008. Teachers following children?: Heteronormative responses within a discourse of child-centredness and the emergent curriculum. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood* 33: 122-131.