TEN LESBIAN STUDENTS REFLECT ON THEIR SECONDARY SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

Lying is done with words and also with silence.
- Adrienne Rich (1976: 186)

Someday, maybe, there will exist a well informed, well considered and yet fervent public conviction that the most deadly of all possible sins is the mutilation of a child's spirit.

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education at the University of Canterbury.

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Abstract

This thesis comprises part of a parallel study currently being undertaken with a gay male researcher. It investigates the secondary school experiences of lesbian and gay youth and the ways in which these experiences affected young lesbians coming to terms with their emerging lesbian identities.

Using qualitative research methodology, two semi-structured interviews were conducted across two urban sites with ten young lesbian women between the ages of fourteen and twenty-five.

Various feminist theories and contemporary adolescent developmental theories were drawn on to provide a context within which the participants' experiences could be situated.

The research revealed that with one notable exception, secondary schools do little to support young women who do not conform to the heterosexual norm. As a result the participants felt marginalised and excluded, both within the school curriculum and from their peers and teachers. Many felt compelled to suppress their sexual identity. The strategies that they used to do this and their negative effects are then described.

Finally I draw upon previous studies and the participants' suggestions to suggest ways in which schools could change to meet the needs of lesbian students more fully.
Acknowledgements

This work is dedicated to the ten young lesbian women that I interviewed for this study. Their talents, strengths and passion make me hopeful for the future.

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CHAPTER ONE

'... Lesbian and gay adolescents must surely be one of the most under researched groups of adolescents and the most poorly misunderstood in terms of sexuality' Goggin (1993).

Carrying out a literature review in this field of study is fraught with obstacles that may not exist in other areas of educational research. Until comparatively recently, relevant published research or accounts of lesbian students' experiences have been sparse. The limited and fragmented nature of the material in New Zealand reflects a worldwide trend. The heterosexual focus of western society, has resulted in the construction of lesbians and gay men as a marginalised group and this has increased their invisibility (Sears, 1991). In addition women generally, feminists have argued, have been silenced in the education system (Alton-Lee, A and Densem, P 1992; Spender, 1982). Because of the limited literature, I have referred to current writings on adolescent developmental theory as they pertain to lesbian and gay youth.

Educational research which has been carried out often assumed that lesbians' experiences were the same as those of their gay male counterparts (Squirrell, 1989; Griffin, 1992; Kitzinger, 1987). Recent studies have questioned this assumption and attempted to redress the balance by placing more emphasis on gender, culture and race factors in their discussion of lesbian and gay identity (Sears, 1991; Stapp, 1992; Squirrell, 1989; Trenchard, 1988).

In New Zealand, there are few studies available which document the experiences of lesbian students in secondary schools. Because of the
gaps in the literature it is necessary to draw on the perspectives of researchers from the United States, Great Britain, Canada and Australia. The literature review falls into two main areas; studies that focus exclusively on lesbian students, and research that has combined the experiences of lesbian and gay youths at secondary school. Each of these categories will be discussed in terms of methodology and findings. Strategies for change form such a strong feature of the literature that they will be discussed in a separate section.

Studies which focus on lesbian students

In the United Kingdom, Trenchard (1988) drew on data that had previously been collected when she worked in collaboration with Warren (Trenchard and Warren, 1984). The researchers provided statistical data describing the experiences of 415 self identified lesbians and gay students in secondary schools in Britain. 136 of these were women and 279 of them male. The sample was contacted through leisure clubs and support groups for lesbian and gay youth, and a media campaign. Questionnaires were administered and interviews undertaken with the participants. Information concerning their high school experiences, and the effects of those experiences, were collected.

Their research suggested that there was a silence regarding any mention of lesbian issues in the curriculum. They found that in terms of getting information through formal channels at school, 60 percent of the young women reported that neither homosexuality nor lesbianism was mentioned in lessons. If it was mentioned, only one in five indicated that it was in a way that it was helpful. One out of forty said that homosexuality was mentioned in sex education. Only ten percent of
the young women indicated that their school library stocked books that mentioned lesbians and less than half of these said that they were helpful. School counsellors were perceived to have invalidated lesbians' experience or dismissed it as a phase and the students would not recommend approaching them if they wanted to talk about their sexuality. Many of the participants were concerned that what they said would not remain confidential.

In her later article, Trenchard (1988) acknowledged the specific issues that lesbians faced as young women in secondary schools. The researcher documented the perspectives of young women who were both closeted and out at school and described the effects that being a lesbian at school had on their sense of self worth, academic progress and view of the world.

While the article used the same data as Trenchard and Warren (1984), the specific focus on lesbian experiences reinforced the earlier findings, and also placed the students' experiences within the context of schools where institutional heterosexism reflected the dominance of heterosexual culture in western society.

Khayatt's (1994) study documented the school experiences of twelve young lesbians. This research was undertaken as part of a parallel study with a gay male researcher and was funded by the Ontario Ministry of Education through a grant to the Ontario Institute for Education. The researchers aimed to detect the various organisational factors that prevented lesbian and gay students from realising their potential within the education system.
The researcher conducted individual interviews with the self-selected participants. Seven were white, two had a parent of a different race or ethnicity from the other and three were Asian. They primarily lived in and around Toronto and came from middle class and low income families.

The study revealed that there were no mentions of lesbianism in the curriculum by heterosexual and lesbian educators. The researcher also noted that information about lesbians was suppressed and distorted amongst educators and peers. Khayatt suggests that the options open to lesbian students in these environments are very limited. They can either stay hidden and deny their lesbian identity, come out and be harassed or find support outside school. The researcher observed that none of these options provide for quality education.

Ann-Marie Stapp's unpublished M.A. thesis in Social Work (1991) is the most extensive New Zealand research dealing with lesbians' experiences in schools. For her thesis she interviewed ten young pakeha lesbians between the ages of 17 and 22. A feminist approach was adopted in this project. The methods included individual audio-taped informal interviews with participants and two group interviews with young lesbians from lesbian and gay youth groups. As part of her research Stapp also interviewed three lesbian teachers individually.

Focusing on the students' secondary school experiences, the research revealed that little positive information was available in schools about lesbian issues. Any information that young lesbians did receive was indirect and reinforced the idea that there was something wrong and abnormal about being lesbian. Lesbian material was included in the
Health syllabus and specifically in the Life Skills unit. However the content was perceived by the participants to be limited and lacking in positivity. The use of the material was also inconsistent. The young women felt that there was more information available on gay men and AIDS than on lesbian issues. Those students who attended Catholic schools perceived that lesbian issues were hidden in all aspects of the curriculum.

Guidance counsellors were perceived to be unhelpful and students felt the need to be careful in choosing teachers with whom to confide their personal feelings about being lesbian. A number of young lesbians had been labelled negatively and harassed by their peers. Most of the information received about sexuality concerned heterosexuality and those students who tried to find out about lesbian issues amongst school resources were unsuccessful. However, openly gay male teachers had helped some students come to terms with their lesbianism, as did outside support groups.

The study showed that the lack of material and support for young lesbians meant that they were unable to identify as lesbians at school in positive ways. The study also identified that harassment, verbal and physical abuse and silencing of their lesbian realities resulted in mental and emotional stress.

In collaboration with the research participants, Stapp discussed strategies that could be used to disseminate information helpful to young lesbian women within schools. These included simple strategies such as teachers not assuming their students were heterosexual, and being available to give information or help young women make choices.
Another New Zealand study was undertaken by O'Brien in 1988. She investigated the role that the Homosexual Law Reform debate of 1985/86 played in the secondary school experiences of six young pakeha lesbians who attended school at that time.

Like other studies, her interviews revealed that more information and discussion was needed on lesbian issues. It also suggested that a good way to counteract negative images of lesbianism was to meet and get to know other lesbians. O'Brien also recommended that classroom environments which displayed positive images of lesbians, out lesbian teachers and access to lesbian information in libraries would provide more support for young lesbians in schools.

In 1992 I undertook a small scale participatory project in which three young women who ranged in age from 18 to 19 years old were interviewed about their secondary school experiences. I wanted to ascertain if their school experiences correlated with the results of overseas studies such as Trenchard and Warren (1984). I was also interested in investigating whether the participants perceived that their schooling experiences as lesbians differed from that of gay men. Another area I covered in the research were the dynamics that occurred between lesbian students and their teachers. I concluded that the participants perceived themselves to be less visible than young gay men and face very different issues from them. While there was a strong need for role models in schools, the power differentials between teachers and students and the lack of safety that many lesbian educators felt, prevented any support of lesbian students from taking place.
A significant piece of New Zealand research is provided by Taylor (1989) who produced a discussion paper entitled *Lesbian and Gay Youth Services In New Zealand*. This paper investigated the specific needs of lesbian and gay youth within the areas of accommodation, education, mental health, suicide, support services and youth groups.

Arguing that there is a lack of accessible and appropriate information for lesbian and gay youth, he highlights the need for support, information and resources to be developed in order that young lesbians and gays can have healthy self esteem. He also recommended that more research be undertaken in these areas.

Barbeler (1992) carried out extensive research on the lives of young lesbians in Sydney. Two hundred and twenty respondents were surveyed in and around the Sydney metropolitan region. The ages of the participants ranged from 14 to 25. The aim of the research was to establish an accurate data base in order to undertake analysis of the current attitudes and behaviours held by Australian adolescents. The researcher hoped that the data would illustrate the need for specific services for this target group and recommend health and support provisions to agencies that cater to youth and women. The final aim of the research was to identify and offer support to young lesbians within the lesbian community.

Barbeler (1992) identified 51 of her sample of 200 lesbians as having experienced discrimination in the education system. Educational institutions, including the tertiary sector, were highlighted by the participants as the area in which they experienced the most discrimination. However she did not specify what forms this
discrimination took. Of her sample, 35 percent had contemplated taking their lives and 45.5 percent had attempted suicide.

Research that combines the experiences of lesbian and gay youths at secondary school

In the United States Sears (1991) undertook an extensive study of the childhood and adolescent experiences of lesbian and gay youth in South Carolina. Between 1986 and 1988 he interviewed 36 self identified young lesbians and gay men who had attended high school within the last ten years, whose mean age was 23. Each of the interviewees participated in a three hour research session made up of an open-ended audio-taped interview and the administration of two standardised questionnaires. From the group of participants, thirteen were selected and their biographies are presented as case studies which explored how sexual, gender, racial and class factors intersect to produce sexual identities for these young men and women.

Sears identified that lesbian and gay issues were seldom discussed in the curriculum and that any discussion of sexuality focused on heterosexual concerns. The participants experienced verbal and physical harassment at school from both peers and educators, many of whom expressed a strong disapproval of homosexuality. Fear of harassment meant that schools were not safe places for them to be open about their sexuality. As a result the students repressed and denied their sexual feelings, passed as heterosexual and in some cases colluded with other students in verbally and physically harassing other students who were perceived by them to be either lesbian or gay.
percent of the interviewees felt isolated from other lesbian and gay people and as a result coped by using a number of different strategies.

Often the student's academic performance was adversely affected and some students became chronic truants. Over half of the interviewees used drugs and alcohol. One in six reported that they did this to cope with homosexual feelings. Other coping strategies included withdrawing into books, over-achieving academically, heterosexual promiscuity and overeating. 63 percent of the young lesbians and gay youth that he interviewed had contemplated suicide (more women than men were identified) and 11 percent had attempted suicide. All of the young lesbians and gays interviewed said that they wished that they had more supportive teachers, parents and peers.

The researcher concluded that lesbian and gay youth from minority cultures faced far greater difficulties. Quinlivan's (1992) data reinforced these findings and pointed out the double discrimination that one of the participants faced increased her feelings of isolation. While not documenting specifically secondary school experiences, Te Awekotuku (1989) discusses the difficulties inherent in shouldering these two burdens.

Tilsey's 1989 New Zealand research project surveyed thirty two lesbian and gay adolescents who self identified as either homosexual or bisexual. Their ages ranged between 15 and 22 for the males and 17 and 22 for the females. Nineteen subjects were male and thirteen were female. They were drawn from a gay youth group. The researcher used a survey questionnaire. He aimed to draw conclusions about lesbian and gay adolescents' attitudes to sexuality and sexual behaviour. In
addition, he investigated the respondents' perceptions of the reactions of peers, friends, parents, teachers and schools to the subjects' sexuality. The researcher also compared his results with a survey undertaken by Tuck (1985) which looked at gender stereotyped beliefs in marriage, education and work amongst Christchurch secondary school adolescents, in order to draw comparisons between the two sets of results.

Tilsey concluded that there was a silence regarding any mention of lesbian and gay issues in the curriculum. A high percentage of the participants felt unsupported as young lesbians and gay men at school. Educators were identified as expressing high levels of personal prejudice and fear about the issue of homosexuality. As a result the participants felt isolated from their peers. Results for the perceived attitudes of teachers and schools indicated that few teachers knew of the subject's sexuality. It was felt strongly that teachers fail to acknowledge homosexuality and failed to give gay and lesbian youth a feeling of self worth. As a result the participants felt isolated within the school environment.

The comparison with Tuck et al's earlier study revealed that the respondents felt unsupported by their schools with respect to their sexuality. It also showed that a strong degree of consensus exists within the homosexual population concerning attitudes to sexuality and the gender stereotyped beliefs of the female sample. None of the young lesbians and only one gay male reported being seduced by an older person of the same sex. Tilsey concluded that this result disproved the commonly held myth of the older lesbian or gay man seducing vulnerable adolescents.
Strategies for Change

Both the researchers and the participants in the literature suggested ways in which schools could be made safer places for lesbian and gay students and teachers.

The curriculum is identified as a key area that needs to change. (O'Brien, 1988; Sears, 1991; Scott 1989; Stapp, 1991; Trenchard and Warren, 1988). The literature suggested that specific areas needing attention were the way in which concepts of the family and family life are portrayed, sexual stereotyping and the presentation of gender in students' learning materials. Teaching resources should also be examined for heterosexist bias and positive images of lesbians and gays should be integrated into the curriculum (Taylor, 1989; Trenchard and Warren, 1988).

Sex education classes were suggested as a forum that could offer students information on issues that confront lesbians and gays, legislation that affects them and information on sexual offences (Sears, 1991; Stapp, 1992, Taylor, 1989). The researchers felt that classrooms should be made safer places for lesbian students and there should be more teacher initiated sexuality discussion in lesson time and more use made of visiting groups (Quinlivan, 1992; Sears, 1991; Stapp, 1991; Taylor, 1989; Trenchard and Warren, 1984).

Stapp (1991) recognised that the methods used to implement these changes are crucial to their success. The lesbian teachers with whom discussed this with point out that if the training was not undertaken
with care, the effect could be disastrous. They advocated contacting the school through the health teacher and targeting a specific level, such as the sixth form. Other student suggestions include taking it slowly at first, using women's networks and trialling the material in one school first.

The need for well-stocked libraries containing a full range of material of high quality on lesbian and gay issues was also highlighted (O'Brien, 1988; Quinlivan, 1992; Sears, 1991; Scott, 1989; Stapp, 1991; Taylor, 1989; Trenchard and Warren, 1988).

The researchers advocate that heterosexism should be combated in schools in the same ways as racism and sexism (Sears, 1991; Stapp, 1991; Trenchard and Warren, 1984). They suggest that surveys of attitudes toward sexuality should take place with staff, students and parents and that any work undertaken with teachers should include an understanding of the pervasiveness of heterosexism in schools.

The researchers identified a danger in seeing the gay problem as a need for individual counselling rather than focusing on the structural or political sources of homophobic attacks in schools (O'Brien, 1988; Quinlivan, 1992; Sears, 1991; Scott, 1989; Stapp, 1991; Taylor, 1989; Trenchard and Warren, 1984). They also maintained that wider power structures than schools need to combat heterosexism such as school governors, teacher training institutions and education authorities.

The literature recognised that educators played a crucial role in effecting the transformation to safer schools for young lesbians and gay men and provided detailed suggestions for educating teachers. Attention
was also given to the role that heterosexual staff can play in instituting change within schools. Squirrel (1989), Doe (1991), Taylor (1989) and Trenchard and Warren (1984) pointed out how important it was for educators to confront their own heterosexism and work alongside lesbian and gay educators in changing the climate and curriculum within their schools. Trenchard and Warren felt that educationalists needed to make a commitment to stop colluding with and reinforcing heterosexism and to start challenging and informing their colleagues.

Scott (1989), Stapp (1992) and Taylor (1989) stressed that raising teachers' awareness and training them in the use of new materials was the key to successful change. Woods and Harbeck (1992) suggested all educators need to examine the role of gender socialisation in perpetuating homophobia and heterosexism. All staff also needed to challenge instances of verbal abuse and openly answer students' questions as they arose. Trenchard and Warren (1984) advocated that teachers receive training in the use of gender neutral terms and in not presuming all people are heterosexual. Woods and Harbeck (1992) point out that any training needed to be backed up with administrative support from within the institution.

Stapp (1992) acknowledged the difficulty and complexity of the roles that lesbian teachers play in their schools. O'Brien (1988) reinforced these conclusions and along with Trenchard and Warren (1984), concluded that until lesbian teachers are supported to come out, the chances for young lesbians to have role models and feel safe enough to be open themselves is nonexistent.
Better trained counsellors were also a priority. The researchers and participants suggested that counsellors should receive specific training in issues that face lesbian and gay youth, establish contacts with lesbian and gay youth support groups and prominently display positive images about sexual choices and alternatives (Quinlivan, 1992; Sears, 1991; Stapp, 1991; Taylor, 1989; Trenchard and Warren, 1984).

The literature highlighted the need for all schools to have equal opportunities policy statements which include provisions to protect lesbian and gay students and educators in their working environments (Stapp, 1992; Trenchard and Warren, 1984). Within schools, equity policies should specifically mention the needs of lesbian and gay teachers and students. The idea of respect for all persons should come through clearly in these documents.

**Evaluating the research**

Sears (1991) provides the most sophisticated analysis of the construction of lesbian and gay identities to date. Despite the fact that he combined the experiences of lesbian and gay youth, he presented a strong case for recognising the importance of gender roles in the development of sexual identity and, along with Stapp (1992) and Trenchard and Warren (1984), acknowledged the differences between lesbian and gay male experiences.

The research that dealt with lesbians' and gay mens' experiences within the same context both informed and yet limited lesbian students' situations as the findings lack a detailed and in-depth lesbian
perspective. Despite Trenchard (1988) writing up her material on lesbians exclusively at a later date, the data used is that gathered from her previous study. This has not allowed a detailed examination of the issues that specifically pertain to young lesbians' to be examined.

Tilsey (1989) pointed out that there was no statistical analysis of the differences between the two surveys or the differences between the male and female responses. The use of questionnaires rather than interviewing resulted in a lack of detailed findings. The information gained on the educational experiences of lesbian and gay youth provided only limited information as it only consisted of a small subheading within the survey. All of the studies cited here advocated that research addressing the differences between lesbian students and their gay male peers was an area that warranted investigation in future research.

The general nature of Barbeler's (1992) study meant that little detail was provided into lesbians' educational experiences. Material on education appeared as a subheading in the 'discrimination' section. It was not an area dealt with in any depth and the researchers did not specify what level of the education system was being discussed. No specific data was provided on secondary school age lesbians. Despite these shortcomings the study offered valuable peripheral material on the effects of discrimination including drug and alcohol usage, depression and suicidal feelings.

Stapp (1991) reinforces many of the issues that Trenchard and Warren highlight in their work. It is the most recent and most extensive NZ material available on this issue and that makes it relevant to
educationalists. The study provides detailed information about students' and teachers' experiences and practical strategies for change from both perspectives. Stapp used lesbian networks to gain participants and shows a clear understanding of how institutional heterosexism functioned to oppress both lesbian teachers and students in secondary schools. However, the issues that face lesbians in schools have not had a chance to be addressed by the educational community because the project was undertaken in the field of Social Work. The research has remained unpublished in education circles.

While the perspective of lesbian teachers adds validity to the students' experiences, there is no investigation of lesbian teacher and student interaction and the complexity of the roles that lesbians place themselves in as students and teachers within schools. Nor is the complex issue of gender in relation to sexuality addressed. Stapp herself acknowledges that her study provides an introduction to issues that confront lesbians in schools and there is a need for more research to be undertaken in the area of lesbians in education.

Although there is a recognition that lesbian students' experiences are different from those of gay men, there has been little data apart from Quinlivan (1992) which investigates the complex issues that can arise between lesbian teachers and students in terms of power differentials in schools or the interaction between lesbian peers. The exploratory nature of the research has prevented detailed study of these dynamics and the effects that they may have on lesbians at school. My study used a small sample of participants from one site which made it difficult to draw conclusions.
Because this is an emerging field of study, much of the literature is of a general nature. It is only recently that detailed and specific research on lesbian students has been undertaken. The literature provides a broad base from which to carry out an in-depth study which would focus exclusively on the experiences of lesbian students within a New Zealand context. It identified issues and provided directions for my own project as well as highlighting the gaps and silences that still remain.

**Framing the Research Question**

Investigating the resistance strategies of young lesbians, in addition to concealing their lesbian identities, is an area in which little research has been undertaken. Sear's (1991) study was valuable in that it investigated the resistance strategies that are used by some lesbians and gay men to maintain a sense of pride in their sexual identity. The descriptive studies of Stapp (1991) and Trenchard and Warren (1984) did not investigate the sites of resistance that lesbian students may have displayed in their schools. To some extent this is understandable considering the exploratory aim of the studies. The data for the Trenchard and Warren study was collected ten years ago and Stapp's study was the first undertaken in New Zealand. However their findings focus solely on the use of concealment strategies and their effects which provide an incomplete picture of some young lesbians' experiences.

Much of the literature acknowledges the need to move beyond description and proposes strategies that could be useful in making schools safer places for lesbians. Stapp (1991) outlined students' and teachers' perspectives on how resources and information could best be
used in schools for lesbian students benefit. Others (Chamberlain, 1989; Sears, 1991; Trenchard and Warren, 1984) provided detailed and wide ranging strategies that would enable schools to cater more effectively for the needs of lesbian youth.

As an 'out' lesbian educator and a feminist, I am aware that many of the issues I face during my working day are very different to those of my heterosexual students and colleagues. In addition to the harassment I have often received from students, and the uncomfortable silences that sometimes occur with some of my heterosexual and lesbian colleagues when I discuss lesbian issues at school, I am also aware that most of my lesbian teaching friends feel too unsafe to openly acknowledge their sexuality at school at all. It is a hidden and secret part of their lives which they leave behind as they enter the school gates. I began to question what sort of role models we, as lesbian adults who deny and hide our sexuality, are providing for the young women whom we teach. I began to wonder if lesbian educators felt unsafe in schools then how would young lesbian students feel? Using Hill Collins' (1991) perspective as an 'outsider within' I recognised that I was in a position to investigate some of these questions.

In my study (1992) I aimed to investigate specifically young lesbian experiences of secondary school and the ways, if any, in which they perceived their situations to be different to those of young gay men. I wanted to document acts of resistance that were used by the participants in order to maintain a sense of pride in their identities as young lesbians, in addition to the strategies, if any, they used to conceal themselves. The ways in which lesbian teachers and students
inter-related within the school environment was an area that little research had focused on and was interested in investigating.

In this research, a picture emerges of the silencing of lesbian students' lives and experience in a world that is determined to hold on to the sacrosanct heterosexual family as the norm. The paucity of literature concerning lesbian students reflects the fact that the voices of lesbian students are only just beginning to be heard. The work in this emerging field provides a general base out of which more detailed studies can develop.

As the literature itself suggests, there is a need for qualitative research focused exclusively on lesbian students taking into account their race, gender and culture and acknowledging the role that society plays in constructing young lesbian's identities (Sears, 1991; Stapp, 1992; Trenchard and Warren, 1984). Such studies would provide an insight into the issues that lesbian students face in New Zealand secondary schools and the double invisibility that lesbians experience as young women in education.

Theoretical framework

There are a number of theoretical perspectives which I draw on in order to illuminate the experiences of young lesbians in secondary schools. I discuss these in the order of importance of their contribution to my research.

The move to develop feminist studies and lesbian and gay studies in academia has opened a window of literature on the construction of
lesbian identity. Writing undertaken on the historical and social construction of lesbian identity within feminist and lesbian studies, outlines the strategies used to define lesbians as deviant in order to marginalise their status. This work provides an insight into many of the current myths held about lesbians and why lesbianism is such a hidden subject in our schools.

Lesbian feminist theory provides an explanation of how patriarchal society marginalises and sidelines lesbianism in order to maintain the dominant ideology of heterosexuality. The marginalisation of lesbians in schools can therefore be understood in the light of the fact that educational institutions reflect the dominant heterosexual values of society and perpetuate the heterosexual norm. Gender issues also become problematic in relation to gay men. Black feminist theory provides parallels with lesbian feminist theory in that both groups (Blacks and lesbians) are positioned as 'others' in the dominant white male discourse of Western society.

Arguing that identities are constructed according to the societies in which we live, the theoretical perspective of social constructionism provides an insight into the roles that gender, race and culture play in forming lesbian identities.

Most recently, in the context of AIDS, queer theory has emerged. Its theorists have attempted to argue that sexual orientation is of primary importance rather than issues of gender or race. Several lesbian theorists have critiqued this perspective on the basis of arguments about the importance of gender and I discuss the points they raise.
Models of adolescent developmental theory for lesbian and gay youth provide another perspective to understand the stages through which young lesbians progress in coming to terms with their sexual identities.
A brief historical outline of the construction of lesbian identity based on the research of Faderman and Smith Rosenberg

*An incapacity for needlework*

*(Havelock Ellis 1897)*

The ways in which lesbians have been socially and historically constructed has implications for the ways in which lesbian students are treated in schools.

A contributing factor to the silencing of lesbian experiences in schools has been the traditional psychological classification of lesbians and gay men as deviant. Woods and Harbeck (1992) point out that homosexuality has been classified as innately evil and deviant behaviour. An investigation of the historical construction of lesbian identity reveals that heterosexuality has been constructed as the norm and any sexual orientation that fell outside it has been defined as sick and threatening to the social order. While male homosexuality has been accorded recognition, albeit latterly as a criminal offence, despite its widely documented existence since Sappho, lesbianism has been rendered less visible by comparison.

According to Faderman (1991) in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the most common figure of female deviance was the cross dresser. Homosexual women were perceived as extreme transvestites in French court records. Most of these women were working class and sought better job opportunities and more freedom. By the mid nineteenth century lesbianism was a minor theme in French literature.
In the 1830's Alexandre Jean-Baptiste Parent Duchatelat, a French medical hygienist made a connection between the lives of prostitutes and cross dressing lesbians. As Vincinus (1992) points out, both of these groups presented a threat to men by the nature of their active and independent sexuality.

Smith Rosenberg (1985) has documented the fact that 18th and 19th century middle and upper class American women routinely formed emotional ties with other women. Within the context of the cultural and social setting of that time, love between women was considered to be socially acceptable and fully compatible with heterosexual marriage. This was understandable in a world which maintained an emotional segregation of women and men due to strict gender roles. The female world that developed was built around female networks. It was kinship and family ties that provided the structure upon which the friendships were mainly based. The women assumed an emotional centrality in each others lives and had a wealth of common experiences. Smith-Rosenberg points out that the mid-nineteenth century provided a culture and environment which ironically enough, permitted women more sexual freedom than occurred in the mid- twentieth century.

In the 1880s and 1890s American male politicians, aided by male physicians, sex reformers and educators condemned female friendship as lesbian and separate female institutions as breeding grounds for unnatural sexual impulses. Smith Rosenberg suggests that these attacks constituted an integral part of the 1920’s assault on feminists and radicals. These men saw women’s relationships in highly political terms and transformed a private into a public issue using a new medico-sexual language. They asserted that these women’s loves were
sexual and that they were unnatural and perverted. Within a theoretical framework of social Darwinism and eugenics, the human body was seen as a metaphor for the social body and physical and sexual disorder was seen to stand for social discord and danger. According to Smith-Rosenberg, heterosexuality was perceived to be the height of human sexual evolution and its maintenance was essential to and symbolic of the social order. It then followed that any other forms of sexuality became unnatural and symbols of social disorder.

The sexologists also played a role in the re-definition of same sex attraction between women. In the mid 1880s Richard Krafft-Ebing was the first to begin to include lesbianism in his discussions of sexual perversions. He did not focus on the sexual behaviour of these women but rather on their physical appearance and social behaviour. He linked lesbianism to the rejection of feminine roles, to crossdressing and to masculine physiological traits. The first symptom of this sexual perversion involved the rejection of conventional feminine roles in childhood.

As Smith Rosenberg describes it, social perversion was seen to precede and signal the onset of sexual perversion. Krafft-Ebing physiologically manifested gender inversion and then made dress analogous to gender. Smith Rosenberg goes on to explain how, using Darwinian taxonomical techniques, he divided lesbianism into four categories or degrees of homosexual deviance. Each category combined sexual, physiological and social characteristics. The categories range from women who exhibited a masculine external appearance to an extreme grade of degeneration.
Through the creation of this new pseudo-scientific category, Krafft-Ebing was able to link the mannish lesbian to womens' rejection of traditional gender roles. The connections he made between womens' demands for social and economic equality and crossdressing, sexual perversion and borderline hermaphroditism discredited and undermined their cause.

According to Smith Rosenberg, it was Havelock Ellis who defined lesbian's lives as both actively sexual and as sexually perverted. Despite the fact that he was a liberal defender of homosexuals, he unintentionally provided the theoretical underpinning for conservative attacks upon the 'New Woman' as sexually perverted and politically dangerous. While recognising that many lesbians were feminine and genteel in appearance, he insisted that a woman's love for other women was sexual and inverted. In his mind, inversion was biological, hereditary and irreversible.

Ellis identified two groups of lesbians, the congenital invert and the homosexual. It was the latter who, while being capable of curability and preventability, could succumb to the congenital invert in an 'unwholesome environment'. Women's educational institutions, especially boarding schools, were cited as one example of such places.

While strenuously defending male homosexuals, he drew connections between what he believed was the rising incidence of middle class lesbianism and feminist political and educational advances. Smith Rosenberg suggests that the reason for this may lie in his commitment to a biological explanation for human behaviour and the ambivalent attitude towards the 'New Woman' that followed from that
commitment. Being unable to abandon the nineteenth century organic model for human behaviour, he saw sexual inversion as rooted in chromosomal or genetic irregularities.

According to Smith Rosenberg, it therefore followed that the invert was not a normal woman. The ideas of the sexologists effectively transformed the American New Woman into a political pariah. By the 1920s charges of lesbianism had become a common way to discredit women professionals, reformers and educators and the image of unmarried women as repressed old maids served to reinforce heterosexuality and marginalise lesbians.

These male-constructed views of female sexuality privileged heterosexuality and male sexuality. Lesbian sexuality on the other hand, was sidelined and categorised as an abnormal and deviant act. While the theoretical framework of deviancy has been challenged by oppression theory which focuses on understanding the unequal relationships between many different social groups (Woods and Harbeck, 1992), the views of turn of the century male sexologists have had an effect on the construction of female sexuality which can be clearly identified in much of the thinking present in many educational institutions today (Khayatt: 1992).

The myths that have arisen from the pseudo-scientific diagnosis construct lesbians as preying on threatened children. It has been this perception which has collided with employer’s, colleagues and parents traditional view of the teacher as responsible caregiver. The role models that lesbian teachers could provide are negated because their positions within schools as responsible caregivers are called into question by
parents, employers, colleagues and students (Quinlivan, 1993; Squirrell, 1990).

The social construction of lesbian sexuality

Writing from the perspective of a lesbian sociologist, Kitzinger (1987) argued that gay-affirmative research can be just as dangerous as adopting the traditional 'deviancy' model. She maintained that the danger lay in focusing on lesbianism as a personal rather than political act and that research that focused on solving the problems of the individual lesbian by increasing communication and listening skills on the part of lesbians and heterosexuals alike, ignored the political challenge that lesbians make to the patriarchal system. She argued that this method merely substituted one depoliticised construction of the lesbian for the other.

Kitzinger contended that these gay-affirmative constructions are incompatible with radical feminist theory which sees lesbianism as a political act which challenges male supremacy. She advocated the use of social constructionist theory in order to deconstruct the ideological content of research on homosexuality and the privileged epistemological status of social science.

Arguing that this approach would also recognise and appreciate the reflexivity of its own theory, she believed that it would offer radically different definitions of the world and critically evaluate them. She maintained that focusing on the humanist view of lesbianism as a personal choice and arguing that lesbians can achieve equality with
heterosexuals through shared communication, understanding and reason, does not take into account the structure of patriarchy and how it perpetuates itself.

Lesbian Feminist Theory: The Case for Compulsory Heterosexuality

Radical feminist theorists maintain that gender is the fundamental mechanism of women's oppression and men's control over women as sexual beings is the basis of male dominance in an essentially patriarchal society. Lesbian feminist theories take this argument a step further, maintaining it is the heterosexual institution that defines and confines women's sexuality and lives.

The development of heterosexism is perceived to be inseparable from the development of the patriarchy. Heterosexuality has been maintained by men because men dominated and classed women as the peripheral sex. Women's sexual subordination was institutionalised in the earliest social codes of patriarchy and reinforced in the practices of the state.

The key tenet of lesbian feminist theories was that lesbianism was a revolutionary act. Bunch (1987) argued that heterosexuality maintains the patriarchy because as the basis of male supremacy, it controls traditional family roles, sexual division of labour, gender defined child-rearing and education. She maintained that both homosexuals and women experience the same oppression, heterosexism, which is described by her as the institutional and ideological domination of heterosexuality and the base of male supremacy. She goes on to assert that neither homosexuals nor women will ever be able to determine
their own lives until there is freedom to choose to be a lesbian. Therefore she argues:

Lesbianism is the key to liberation, and only women who cut their ties to male privilege can be trusted to remain serious in the struggle against male dominance.

(Bunch and Myron 1975: 54)

Building on the work of Johnston (1973) and others, Rich (1980) developed a theoretical analysis of heterosexuality, critiquing the dominance of heterosexual relations which she named 'compulsory heterosexuality'. She asserts that heterosexuality is a political and compulsory institution which propagandises and trains children into strict gender roles and away from alternative sexualities. In addition, women are pressured into believing that marriage and sexual orientation toward men are inevitable, even if they are unsatisfying or oppressive. Therefore the assumption that all men and women are heterosexual is so firmly ingrained that most men and women do not question it. Within this heterosexual construction women are tied emotionally and economically to men. Sexuality and social power are bound together to form a male organised controlled and dominated system. Enforced heterosexuality then, ensures men's physical, emotional and economic access to women. Rich suggests that a key feature of enforcing heterosexuality is: ... the rendering invisible of the lesbian possibility' (Rich, 1980).

Women committed to other women reject the dominance and power of a heterosexual relationship, and in so doing reject the established patriarchal system and therefore present a threat to the patriarchy.
This theoretical assumption was to be critiqued later by black feminist theorists, who took issue with the essentialist tendency of feminist theorists to speak for all women and argued that the privileging of sexuality marginalised the issue of race (Hooks, 1984, Lorde 1984).

The social and institutional context: institutional heterosexism and homophobia

Along with the church and the state, lesbian feminist theorists argue that educational institutions act as agents of punishment to control, manipulate and coerce women into hetero-patriarchal thinking. In this way, sexuality and social power are bound together and comprise a male organised, controlled and dominated system.

The intolerance, homophobia and heterosexism that are part of our wider society is the dominant ideology of the institutions. Therefore the institutionalised nature of prejudice and discrimination against lesbians is a strong feature of schools. O'Brien (1988), Sears (1991), Stapp (1992) and Trenchard and Warren (1984) maintain that schools embody compulsory heterosexuality. This enables them to control adolescent sexuality and to maintain social control. Chamberlain (1985) maintains that homophobia will keep boys and girls in their place better than any school rule. One example that supports this argument is Alton-Lee's (1990) finding that homophobic abuse appeared to be the most detested form of abuse among young males in the classroom and the playground.
The contribution that lesbian feminist theory offers my research

Kitzinger's (1987) model provided a clear explanation of the role that schools play in perpetuating the heterosexual conditioning process. It explained why so many lesbian students remain silent in the face of such a hugely insurmountable machine and why those educators who are 'out' in schools often experience difficulties. She reaffirmed the political nature of the threat that lesbianism poses to patriarchal institutions such as schools and provided a case for locating research in a clear theoretical, political and social context.

This study intends to place lesbian students within the context of institutional heterosexism and investigate how schools perpetuate the homophobia that is present in society. This is characterised by the silence that pervades any mention of lesbianism and gayness in secondary schools, the fact that both lesbian educators and students do not feel safe to acknowledge their sexual identities and that homophobic abuse features so strongly in the lived culture of young male adolescents in schools (Khayatt, 1992; Quinlivan, 1993; Sears, 1991).
Two deconstructive and poststructuralist perspectives of lesbian identity

Monique Wittig addresses the question of why lesbianism is such a threat and challenge to the heterosexual order and suggests that it is because lesbianism represents the only form in which women can live beyond male defined categories of sexuality. For women these categories mean forced personal physical and economic obligations. The lesbian is not a woman because she places herself outside those norms by refusing to accept the mantle of heterosexuality. Wittig discusses the oppressive power of the heterosexual discourse in speaking for lesbians and claiming to speak the truth in a political field:

They prevent us from speaking unless we speak in their discourse.

(Wittig 1992: 25)

She argues that lesbianism and homosexuality cannot be spoken of within the dominant heterosexual discourse because it would question the whole heterosexual system and reveal its incoherence:

Lesbian ... is the only concept I know which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man) because the designated subject (lesbian) is not a woman, either economically, or politically or ideologically.

(Wittig 1992: 20)

Wittig's perspective provides an explanation of the threat that lesbians pose to patriarchy and why such a silence surrounds their existence.
within educational institutions. Because lesbians are not dependent on males they challenge the foundation of male supremacy. Her standpoint emphasises the dangerous and subversive role that lesbians can play in disrupting the dominant male heterosexual discourse.

Writing from a feminist poststructuralist perspective, Judith Butler (1990) critiques Wittig's idea that lesbians exist outside the heterosexual matrix. She maintains that being a lesbian is part and creation of the dominant heterosexual discourse which prohibits it. Therefore lesbians cannot resist what Wittig conceives of as external oppression because they are inherently included in that system. This deconstruction of lesbian identity is revealed in her statement:

I don't believe that gender or race or sexuality have to be identities. I think they are vectors of power.

(Butler, 1992: 85)

Butler goes on to assert that the disruptions lesbians can create within the discourse in which they are embedded make them powerfully subversive. Lesbians cause 'gender trouble' (Butler, 1990) by disrupting the dominant male heterosexual discourse and revealing its construction. The degree of subversiveness possible by lesbians however, is dependent upon the meaning that specific situational audiences give to them.
The contributions of these deconstructive and poststructuralist perspectives to this study

These two perspectives, although coming from different theoretical positions, both offer explanations which account for the marginalisation of lesbians within the education system. From Wittig's perspective, lesbians within schools challenge the supremacy of institutional heterosexuality and this accounts for the silencing of lesbianism within those institutions.

The feminist poststructuralist perspective provided by Butler maintains that lesbians are embedded within the dominant heterosexual discourse and their presence serves to critique and reveal its construction. Her ideas explain why lesbians within schools can constitute such a powerfully subversive force because they exist within, rather than outside the dominant discourse.

Contextualising the 'gender acts' of lesbians within specific situations also enabled me to provide an explanation for the varying experiences of the participants in their specific schools and the ways in which they vary their behaviour according to the situation they are in at the time.

Lesbe gay homo you don't! : queer theory

The key tenet of queer theory is that oppression on the basis of sexuality outweighs concerns of gender. This perspective has produced a certain amount of disquiet on the part of lesbians, who have questioned their role within such a framework (Smith, 1992).
Queer theory and politics have a strongly activist stance and the movement has done much to re-energise lesbian and gay communities and involve lesbian and gay youth in political activism. The aim of these lesbian and gay alliances has been to empower lesbians and gays and lobby for legislative change. Organisations such as Queer Nation, Act Up in The United States and Canada and campaigns like the Stop Clause 28 action in the United Kingdom have run full on campaigns to decriminalise male sexual practices. Extreme tactics and displays of overt (male) sexuality are a feature of their campaigns (Smith, 1993).

Smith (1992) critiques the role that lesbians are playing in Queer Nation alliances that have been formed since the early 90's, arguing that lesbians are being made invisible. She maintains that while queer activists play an important role in fighting for the rights of lesbians and gays, lesbians need to ensure that they are strongly visible especially in the area of sexuality.

Because much queer theory activism has revolved around decriminalising the sexual activities of men and in the case of the British ActUp stance against legislation, little that they have protested about related to lesbians who have often been absent from any discussion. This has been compounded by the fact that many of the concerns of queer groups revolve around legitimising discourses within which lesbians have traditionally been invisible, such as legislation. This, coupled by the fact that women have traditionally not been perceived to be overtly sexual anyway has meant that lesbian sexuality has also been perceived to be non-threatening when compared with the more overt sexuality displayed by gay men. Smith advocates that in order to maintain a lesbian profile within queer organisations, they
must continue to educate gay males about lesbian sexuality in order to play a visible and prominent role in these largely male dominated organisations.
The relevance of queer theory to this study

Queer activism is relevant to young lesbians in a New Zealand context, some of whom perceive that feminism is an outmoded concept and one which is no longer applicable to their lives. An area of my study that I wanted to involve the participants in reflecting on concerned the alliances that could be possible between lesbians and gay men. I was interested to document the political perspectives on this issue, if any, from my participants.

Social Constructionism

Social constructionism is a branch of psychological theory which maintains that people's beliefs, bodies, sexuality, identities and minds are socially inscribed and historically and culturally situated. Lesbian identities then, are seen to be constructs occurring within a social context.

Arguing that sexual identities are socially constructed, Sears in his 1991 study *Growing Up Gay In The South*, examined the ways in which gender, race and culture intersected with sexuality to form the sexual identity of young lesbians and gay men.

*Growing Up Gay In The South* is not a compilation of coming out stories. This study examines the personal and social significance of acquiring a lesbian or gay identity within Southern culture and describes the journeys of young adults in their search for Self.

(Sears, 1991: 18)
The theory of social constructionism is argued from five vantage points by Sears. While acknowledging that same sex erotic attraction as such is not a social construction, his first premise is that 'being' lesbian or gay is a modern day phenomenon and as such is socially constructed (his italics).

He draws on the investigations of Foucault (1976) who maintains that what many people define as morally and socially aberrant is just a historical and social construction. Foucault develops this idea further by arguing that views held arguing the 'abnormality' of homosexuality have been shaped by discourses such as modern medico-scientific knowledge which have played a powerful role in reinforcing many of the negative myths that surround issues of lesbianism and gayness held in society. Secondly, Sears maintains that human beings interpret and reinterpret their lived experiences in an attempt to reconcile personal identity with the past and to make themselves whole. Thirdly, Sears asserts that the construction of sexual identity is integrally related to the society in which we live and that our gender race, class and regional identities are interwoven together to create who we are. Fourthly, he argues that the lesbian and gay community work actively to create a space for themselves in their societies by building upon the history, scripts and language of the culture within which the movement was born. Finally, Sears maintains that within Southern American culture, the young lesbians and gay men that he interviewed were outsiders because of their sexual identity. While many of them have found comfort and a sense of belonging in this new identity, he believes that such self identification and categorisation can lessen self realisation and limit the possibilities for personal growth and change. He also points out that institutions such as schools are important agents for
the transmission of sexual beliefs and values. He maintains that the sexual ideology in American schools reflects the power which dominant social groups use to control the body politic.

Weaknesses of Social Constructionism

The major criticism that has been levelled at social constructionism is its inability to allow for individual agency and for change. However, as a theoretical perspective it overlaps with lesbian feminist theory to provide a useful window onto my research findings.

The insights that Social Constructionism provides for this study

Viewing homosexuality as a modern historical and social construct and investigating discourses that have shaped thinking on homosexuality, provides me with the means to critique the role that educational discourse has played in silencing the voices of lesbians and gays in education.

Because Sears (1991) situates his study within a number of social constructs, he allows for diversity and for difference amongst the participants. There is no homogenisation of lesbian and gay experience. He is also able to investigate the sites of resistance that the young lesbians and gay men he interviewed engaged in. The acknowledgement of diversity within the lesbian community and the emphasis his research placed on the resistance strategies used by lesbian adolescents to maintain themselves in often quite hostile environments, are areas which I intend to develop in this study.
Sears places a great deal of emphasis on the issue of gender in understanding the experiences of lesbian and gay youth. He advocates that a great deal more research needs to be undertaken into lesbian and gay youth which takes gender into account. My exclusive focus on lesbian students indicates that the social construction of gender and sexuality is the primary focus of my research. I am also interested in examining the ways that the participants perceive themselves in relation to young gay men and the differences, if any they perceive between the two groups.

Models of adolescent sexual identity development for lesbian and gay youth

Developmental models of sexual identity integration for lesbian and gay adolescents have been developed by Coleman (1982), Troiden (1989), Sophie (1986) and others. They provide a framework within which to understand the stages that lesbian and gay youth go through in establishing a lesbian and gay identity. Focusing on Coleman's model, I will outline it's developmental stages and some of the issues raised by him about the model, provide a brief critique of the models and outline the relevance of the approach to this study.

Based upon concepts similar to those devised by Erikson (1956) and Sullivan (1974), Coleman (1982) suggests that each stage of identity development must be resolved before moving on to the next one, that social forces have an important role to play in the the integration of a person and that the self is shaped to a large degree by the nature of interpersonal relationships.
Coleman's model incorporates five stages. He points out that people seldom move in a uniform fashion through each stage. The first of these is the *pre-coming out stage*. It is characterised by young lesbians and gay men feeling 'different' within a society that expects people to fit into the heterosexual norm. As a result, denial and repression of same sex attractions and feelings is common. The denial and suppression can result in depression and low self esteem and in the extreme, self abuse and suicide.

Individuals in the *coming out stage* acknowledge their homosexual feelings to themselves and to others. Jay and Young (1979) report that this occurred for females at a later age to gay men (18 rather than 13-14) and that many of their participants did not realise this until they were out of their chronological adolescence. Coleman acknowledges that there is a wide variation in responses. This finding has been born out by researchers such as Sears (1991), who identified that males, on average, experienced coming out at 12.4 years and females at 13.3 years of age. The second task of this stage is disclosing to others.

*First relationships* is the third stage that Coleman identified. The aim of this stage is to develop and sustain a relationship. Coleman points out that lesbians and gays are at a distinct disadvantage learning to do this as few role models exist.

The *exploration stage* is a period of exploring and experimentation and usually includes the first major experiences of social and sexual activity with others. Coleman points out that many lesbian and gay youth are denied an adolescence during their teenage years because there is so much emphasis placed on heterosexuality at this time. Because of this
lesbian and gay youth often experience much of the exploration that forms a large part of adolescence at a later age. This can be confusing and frightening for young men and women who have developed intellectually and vocationally.

The final stage is known as integration. It is at this stage that individuals integrate their private and public identities into one self image. This is a stage that can last for the rest of a person's life. Other developmental tasks concerning phases of adulthood are dealt with at this time and often young lesbians and gay men move in and out of this stage, depending on the situations they are dealing with.

Troiden (1989) and Sophie's (1986) models both comprise four stages which move towards identity integration. The developmental milestones incorporated within each stage are similar. They include sensitization and first awareness of homosexual feelings, identity confusion and testing and exploration, identity assumption and acceptance and finally, identity commitment and integration.

Accounting For Gender Differences

Coleman (1982) and Troiden (1989) point out that the amount of sexual orientation may differ for males and females. This has been a result of sex-role identification in western societies which has lead to sexual exploration being more acceptable for males than for females.

This is borne out by Sears (1991). Using Sophie's (1986) developmental model, his research indicated that while the order of the stages was common to both the females and males he interviewed, there were
differences on the basis of gender. Females engaged in heterosexual activity before erotic awareness of same sex attraction in Stage 1. This was four years earlier than males. Males were also more likely to experiment with homosexual identity before they engaged in heterosexual activity. Women, on the other hand, experienced a longer timespan (six years to males' two years) between female heterosexual and same sex experiences.

Shortcomings of the Developmental Model

While this model provides a useful tool for understanding how lesbian and gay youth come to terms with their sexual identity, several of the theorists also expressed reservations about its predictive use. Coleman (1982) cautions readers against assuming that the developmental model will fit reality exactly and Sophie (1986) questioned whether the model accounted for individual variation.

Coleman thought that the categorisations oversimplified sexual orientation in its failure to take into account the notion of a continuum of sexuality (Kinsey, Pomeroy and Martin, 1948). He also thought that there was a danger in adopting a model that oversimplified developmental tasks and insisting that each must be completed in order to achieve identity integration. He points out that not all people achieve identity integration and that many get stuck along the way.

Along with Plummer (1975) and Sears (1991), he emphasises the role that societal attitudes also play in developing positive identities. Plummer also argues that the stages reveal little about what these
experiences actually meant to the child and Kroger (1989). Sears and Remafedi (1987) pointed out that the stages take little account of different cultural meanings assigned to experiences or how these experiences will be perceived 15 years later. Rosenthal (1993) maintains that there is little known about how young lesbians and gays experience their lives as they are living them, rather than as they are remembered and that;

... there is an urgent need for longitudinal studies of coming out that trace the experiences of young gays and lesbians as they grow up and develop new sexual identities.

(Rosenthal 1993: 120)

Kroger (1989) noted that that Erikson's original identity theories were based on essentialist definitions of female identity within which biology dictated identity. Kroger suggests that his:

... entire developmental model may reflect male experience only, with individuation issues primarily defining earlier stages of development and issues of relationship coming primarily into vogue only in adulthood.

(Kroger, 1989: 33)

While Troiden (1989) acknowledges gender as an important factor, discussing each stage separately as it affects lesbians and gay men, he also made use of stereotypical gender characteristics when he described the sense of feeling 'different' that individuals experienced in terms of the societal expectations of their gender, during the first sensitization
stage. Goggin (1993) uses Bell’s (1981) study as a means to illustrate this stage:

Young lesbians:
I felt different: unfeminine, ungraceful, not very pretty, kind of a mess...

Young males:
... I was indifferent to boys' games, like cops and robbers. I was more interested in watching insects and reflecting on things.

(Bell et al. 1981a: 74-86)

The use of these stereotyped gender characteristics to describe young lesbians and gay men seems unnecessarily simplistic and limited. It also reinforces many of the myths that surround descriptions of lesbians and gay men and limits the possibility for differences to exist within the lesbian and gay community. Sears (1991) points out the extent to which a desire for categorisation can limit the personal growth of individuals within the lesbian and gay community and prevent it growing. It would be interesting to see the development of models such as these in a society where lesbianism and gayness were not so stigmatised. Perhaps there would be no need for them?

Relevance of adolescent developmental theory to this research

Despite the shortcomings, adolescent developmental theory offers one of the few models specific to lesbian and gay youth and provides a useful framework within which to understand how young lesbians come to terms with their sexual identity. The models account for gender
differences and provide flexibility from stage to stage. Therefore I have utilised the theory in this field to provide explanations for the stages through which the participants are coming to terms with their lesbian identity in Chapter 8.

I intend to draw on the various theoretical perspectives I have outlined in this chapter in order to understand the complex and shifting identities of the lesbians in this study.
CHAPTER 2: THE METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the methodology used to conduct this study. I begin with a discussion of the difficulties inherent in conducting academic research in the lesbian and gay communities. The research design is then outlined which incorporates issues of feminist research methodology and ethics. Using Haig's (1987) model, a constraints analysis is then undertaken. Following that, the interview process is described and participant data provided.

The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Conducting Academic Research With/in Lesbian Communities

Squirrell (1989) discusses the difficulties inherent in undertaking research into lesbians and gay subjects. She highlighted the difficulties of gaining funding in an area that many universities consider to be unsuitable and too contentious to work in and believed that many academics view research on homosexuality and lesbianism with suspicion and hostility. She notes that researchers in Britain are often warned that they are risking their academic careers by studying this topic.

Describing the research he completed on young lesbians and gay youth in the South of the U.S.A, Sears (1992a) cited a lack of any demographic data and conceptual difficulties involved in defining people on the basis of sexual orientation as problems he encountered as a gay male researcher.
Several lesbian academics have documented the difficulties of meeting academic expectations while endeavouring to remain grounded within lesbian communities. (Atmore, 1992; Laurie, 1992; Sitka, 1991). There is scepticism expressed by some lesbians regarding universities and the perceived role that they play in perpetuating heterosexuality and denying lesbian experience. Sitka (1991) for example, questioned working within 'the system' to change things and what she perceived as an emphasis placed upon theory at the expense of lived experience within academic institutions.

Sears (1992a) discusses issues which can arise when a researcher produces data that conflicts with the politically correct image that lesbian and gay communities wish to project, maintaining that the pressure often results in data which simplifies the complexity of many lesbians and gay males lives. Along with Butler (1990), he asserts the importance of deconstructing the very categories which provide our sexual identities. Describing this conflict as it arose in his own research, he pointed out that it can often result in data which does not advance the lesbian and gay 'cause'.

However, despite the difficulties, there are advantages in this position. Aside from making this study possible, it does provide a researcher with a perspective which provides valuable insights. There are parallels between lesbians and Maori women in the ways that we have been constructed and marginalised as Other by dominant discourses (Clothier, 1993; Irwin, 1992; Smith, 1992; Walker, 1985).

Arguing that Black intellectuals in touch with their marginality in academic settings are in a good position to produce distinctive analyses
of race, class and gender. Hill Collins (1991) advocates that all researchers investigate the gains to be made from their positionality. Because I walk in a number of different worlds, my 'outsider within' status as a lesbian within academia, as a lesbian educator in a secondary school and within lesbian communities, provides me with a number of different perspectives on the experiences of young lesbians in schools.

Sears suggested that future educational research should take into account the ways in which sexual identity during adolescence is shaped by race and gender context. Hill Collins (1991) also emphasised the linked nature of oppression and the importance of considering the ways in which race, gender and class intersect, maintaining that this approach is a strong feature of black feminist thought.

Faraday (1982) and Kitzinger (1987) are also sceptical of the traditional silencing of lesbian voices within academia and have noted the lack of research undertaken on lesbians compared with gay men. They point out that frequently women are incorporated as an afterthought into models based on male homosexuality. They both argue for a recognition of the differences between lesbians and gay men. And in the last ten years a growing body of research that documents lesbian experiences and acknowledges the differences between lesbians and gay men has emerged. (Plummer, 1992., Jeness, 1992).

While this study does not combine the research findings of young lesbians and gay males, it is being undertaken as part of a parallel study with a gay male researcher who is currently conducting research into the experiences of young gay men in secondary schools. Working
together, we are able to focus on the similarities between young lesbians and gay male youth, while also acknowledging the differences between them. We envisage that combining our findings will result in a study that will provide many similarities and contrasts between the two groups.

Research Design

Plummer (1981) found that conventional social science enquiry limited research into homosexuality in its concern with behaviourism and favouring of methodological exactitude over theoretical understanding. He also critiqued the ways in which social science enquiry has hidden values while feigning to be neutral and objective. Sears (1992a) stressed the value of critically based qualitative research in helping readers understand how sexuality, race, class, gender and culture are rooted in a society's history and culture. He maintained that the use of in-depth qualitative research methods enabled him to portray the worlds of lesbian and gay participants using their own voices. I have used these methodological tools as part of this study.

In keeping with the issues raised by Hooks (1990), Jones (1992) and Hill-Collins (1991) and numerous feminist researchers, I have made my subject position as a feminist and a lesbian educator explicit. Hill Collins (1991) argues the usefulness of identifying and using your own standpoint in conducting research. Maintaining that insisting on black female self definition validates black women's power as human subjects and allows women to reject internalised oppression, she believes that acknowledging the position of 'outsider within' is necessary for black survival. Such an approach also resists the dehumanising effects of
being constructed as Other, which she argues, are essential to domination.

Lather (1991) also invites researchers to consider how they package the stories they tell about Others. She advocates exploring different ways within the boundaries of research to frame the role of researcher in order to disrupt the text and make explicit the nature of the researchers role.

Feminist researchers have highlighted the ethical difficulties that feminist face when conducting research. Patai (1991) argues that while feminist researchers maintain they are transforming society, as academics they benefit from the projects that are undertaken to improve qualifications and gain promotion in academia. Patai maintains that the ultimate power of the researcher though, is having the power to interpret other women's words.

Perhaps the first step in overcoming some of these problems is to acknowledge them. Working with lesbians I was aware of the importance of establishing my credibility as an older lesbian, a role model and ethically as an adult interviewing young women who are a great deal younger than I am. Fine (1992) discusses how easy it is to appropriate the voices of adolescents when undertaking research with them:

When I have spoken with adolescents, particularly low income adolescents, it's been consistently easy to gather up their stories of critique, dissent, dissent, contradictory consciousness and quite vivid counterhegemonic commentary in order to tell my
story. Low income adolescents easily criticise their schools, challenge the relation of education credentials to labor market participation and name the hypocrisies that fuel societal terrors of sexualities.


Both as an older lesbian and as an educator I felt a responsibility to have very clear boundaries with the participants in this study. In many instances they have revealed parts of their lives which had never been spoken about to anyone before and trusted me with information and feelings that in some cases caused a great deal of personal pain and sense of loss. I have endeavoured to keep their information confidential, support them where it was needed and consult them as fully as it was possible about this project, accepting any changes they wanted to make. This was sometimes difficult due to time restraints.

I also know many lesbian teachers and am aware of the dilemmas they face within the education system. For the vast majority of them, school is not a safe place in which to be open with either their colleagues or students about their lesbian identity. (Khayatt,1992; Quinlivan, 1993). As part of this study I have had to wrestle with the issue of 'outing' lesbian teachers and administrators who would prefer their sexual identities to remain hidden. It is for this reason that I have disguised some of the schools that the participants attended.
Constraint analysis

Haig (1987) maintains that problems which occur during the course of undertaking research are an integral part of the process of researching and that documenting these difficulties provides insights into the nature and scope of the data collected. The constraints that I encountered occurred largely as a result of the nature of the research topic.

The Process

Finding the participants, as I have outlined elsewhere, was a difficult undertaking. The transitory nature of activities within lesbian communities such as Icebreakers (a support group for young women who are questioning their sexuality) because they are less well resourced than gay male structures, made my attempts at finding participants more difficult. Gaining participants and conducting interviews in the North Island centre was difficult due to lack of contacts in lesbian communities and distance. Keeping in contact with the participants was also difficult. The participants moved houses a lot; some as many as three to four times during the period of the research.

The nature of the material

Establishing trust with the participants was crucial to the research process, especially because for some of the young women this was the first time that they had acknowledged their lesbian feelings and spoken to anyone about their experiences. Gaining rapport was made even
more difficult because of the restricted time available in which to carry out the interviews in the North Island.

Equipment breakdown also caused problems. After the first North Island interview, the tape recorder broke down. After several unsuccessful attempts with other machines I was forced to write down the comments of the last North Island interviewee in longhand.

One of the greatest difficulties which arose during the course of this research was dealing with the pain that many of the interviewees experienced. After the interviews some of the participants felt depressed and guilty about the extent to which they had suppressed their sexual identities and themselves in order to survive in what amounted to very hostile environments.

As an adult I felt a responsibility for bringing this pain to the surface and have endeavoured to keep in contact with the participants who felt the most negatively affected by the interviews. Hearing these stories also bought up pain and anger for me. I felt angry at the ways in which these women were sidelined and silenced within educational institutions which have a responsibility to cater to the emotional and physical safety of all young people in their care.
Setting Up The Project: An Exercise in Lesbian Invisibility

Squirrell (1989) and Sears (1991) both document the difficulty inherent in sampling the hidden population of lesbian and gay youth. One reason for this is that many young lesbians and gay men do not acknowledge their sexual identities until after they have left school (Goggin, 1993). Squirrell also pointed out the immense difficulties in gaining a sample group of lesbian students to interview, maintaining that they are hard to find and even less willing to talk because to do so would threaten their safety at school. Difficulties have been compounded by lesbians choosing to pass as heterosexual in order to protect themselves. These problems proved to be a feature of my research process.

Tracing the Participants

Tracing the ten participants proved to be a difficult and time consuming task. However, it was understandable considering the silence that surrounds their existence in schools. After extensive attempts to contact young lesbians in schools, I began to enquire within lesbian communities. This proved to be particularly difficult in the North Island centre.

Eventually seven participants came from a South Island urban centre and three from a North Island urban centre. There were two advantages to conducting interviews over two sites. The first was to gain as wide a sample as was possible and secondly, the fact that the participants come from two centres meant they were not as readily identifiable.
The participants were gained from a wide variety of sources. Two interviewees came through contacts made with a Icebreakers, a support group for young lesbians. Three participants came from teacher contacts in G.L.E.E, a national organisation of lesbian and gay teachers. One participant emerged as a result of a request through the Feminist Studies department of a university. One young woman was a previous contact, she then contacted a friend of hers who also indicated a willingness to participate in the study. One participant approached me after I placed an advertisement in a woman's bookshop. Another interviewee was approached through friendship networks. One young woman contacted me through a telephone referral service for the lesbian community in a large urban city. She later declined to be interviewed and provided no reason for this.

I began by contacting the Christchurch participants individually, describing the project I was planning to undertake and making my subject position as a feminist and lesbian educator clear. At this stage I had only gained four of the participants so I arranged for us to meet together as a group. At this informal meeting I was able to provide them with more detailed information about my own perspectives, what I wanted to investigate and why and an indication of the time commitment that it would involve from them.

Once each young woman had agreed to be part of the project we discussed methodological issues such as conducting individual as opposed to group interviews. I also negotiated the use of the tape recorder to record the interviews. Confidentiality was ensured by the use of pseudonyms to protect the participants identities.
The Interview Process

The participants wanted to see a copy of the interview schedule before the interview took place and where possible, this occurred. Each participant took part in two audio-taped interviews that were structured fairly closely on the interview schedule. However there was room within the framework to incorporate material that the participants felt was important and to pursue specific areas of interest. Each interview was one to two hours long. The participants were free to turn off the tape recorder at any time during the course of the interview.

The South Island interviews took place over a long period from June to September in 1993. This was due to the fact that participants were difficult to find and that one decided to pull out of the project at a very late stage. In contrast, the North Island interviews were completed very quickly. All of the participants were interviewed twice over a period of 4 days. While I was able to listen to the first interview before the second one took place, because of time constraints, transcription was not possible. These constraints were further complicated by equipment breakdowns. Early in 1994, I was able to consult again with one participant whose perspectives changed so radically over the course of the project that I needed to gain more information from her.

Once the interviews were transcribed, they were given back to the participants to check that I had accurately recorded what they had said. At this point some of the interviewees deleted material they did not wish me to use. Following the preliminary data analysis, the interviewees were sent a copy of the draft to check that I had not
misinterpreted any of their comments. I was also able to incorporate their suggestions for layout and included new material. They still had the opportunity to delete material they did not wish to be used at this stage.

Because of time constraints the participants did not see their words framed and contextualised by the literature and theory. However, they all received copies of the interview transcripts and the finished study. They would also be informed by me whenever the study was used publicly.

**Participant Data**

As Trenchard and Warren (1984) point out, there are advantages in gaining the participants through lesbian networks. The young lesbians involved in this study were all self-identified as lesbian and volunteered their contribution.

The interviewees ranged in age from 15 to 25. The youngest participant is currently attending school and the oldest left ten years ago. Initially I perceived that the closer the interviewees were to their school experiences the more relevant their data would be. For this reason I was concerned at the length of time some of the participants had been away from school (ten years in one case). However, Sears (1991) suggests that there are difficulties involved in interviewing adolescents who are still in secondary school.

He deliberately chose not to include students who still attended school in his 1991 study, citing research which suggested that the perceptions
of homosexual identified adolescents often differed markedly from homosexuals who identified at an older age. These findings indicated that the former group tended to be less educated, have greater likelihood of professional referrals and more interest in emotional intimacy. Sears also thought that they would be difficult to find.

Referring to studies which indicated that interviewees tended to be more objective after the event which they were being asked to reflect upon, he avoided contacting young lesbians and gay men who currently attended school. Sears maintained that had he only interviewed younger adolescents, his data would not have reflected a broad spectrum of sexuality and would only have been confined to those who openly stated they were lesbian or gay and those who told close friends.

Sears (1991) discussed the importance of incorporating a range of age, experience, class, gender and race in his sample of participants in order to reflect the diversity which he perceived as being a strong feature of the lesbian and gay communities. Because the interviewees were so difficult to trace, I felt I could not be too particular about their age, race, class or the geographical area they went to school in. Despite my best efforts only one of the ten attended high school in a rural area. However there are parallels between her experience and that of the interviewee who lived in a provincial town. The participants did attend a range of single sex, co-educational, state and private schools.

This study reflects the perspectives of ten young lesbians who identified as pakeha. Therefore the experiences of young lesbians who identify themselves as Maori, Samoan or African-American and experience the double oppression of race and sexual orientation (Quinlivan, 1992;
Sears, 1991; Stapp, 1992; Te Awekotuku, 1989) are not included within the scope of this study.

In some cases, biographical information has been blurred using the strategies that Middleton (1989) incorporated in her study. This was undertaken in order to protect the participants' confidentiality and in some cases disguise the schools they attended. This was important in order to protect educators that felt uncomfortable about being so readily identified.

The participants

Belinda is 15 and attends an urban single sex school. She is currently in the fifth form and sitting School Certificate.

Alice is 19 years old. She attended a private girls school from 1987 to 1990 and left at the end of the fifth form to go to an inner city state co-educational school. She left that school in the seventh form at the end of 1992 with Sixth Form Certificate.

Cathy is 19 years old. She attended an urban catholic state integrated single sex school from 1987-1992 and left at the end of the seventh form with an A Bursary.

Toni is 19 years old. She attended a rural state co-educational high school in a provincial town school from 1988-1992. She left at the end of the seventh form with Higher School Certificate.
Rachel is 20. She attended an suburban state co-educational school from 1987 to 1991 and left in the seventh form with two Sixth Form Certificate subjects.

Isobel is 21 she has attended two urban state co-educational schools. One in New Zealand from 1986-1988 and the other in Australia from 1988-1991. She left school at the end of the seventh form with the equivalent of a A Bursary.

Melissa is 19. She attended a provincial state single sex school from 1987 to 1992. She left at the end of the sixth form with School Certificate in four subjects.

Vita is 20. She attended a private catholic state integrated school from 1986 to 1990 and in the seventh form she attended an inner city state co-educational school from 1992 to 1993 where she undertook a pre-tertiary course. Her Highest qualification is a B Bursary.

Jackie is 23. She attended an urban state co-educational high school from 1984- 1988, leaving in the seventh form with an A Bursary.

Lisa is 25. She attended an urban state single sex girls school from 1981 to 1984, leaving early in her sixth form year with School Certificate in 5 Subjects.
CHAPTER 3: CURRICULUM

Lisa: I knew it was something that wasn't talked about and I sort of thought well that's the way the world is, they don't want to talk, they don't want to know...

What counts as school knowledge ... tends to embody the interests and culture of the group or groups who have the power to distribute and legitimise their world view through educational institutions.

(Apple, 1983: 208)

Using Bourdieu's theory, Harker (1985) asserts that cultural capital can be seen to be the same as economic capital. In the same way that our economic institutions work for the benefit of those who already have economic capital, our educational institutions favour those who possess the cultural capital of the dominant group. Walker (1990) uses this theory to explain the ways in which the cultural capital of Maori students is excluded in educational systems which are structured according to Pakeha cultural capital. Parallels can be drawn between Maori and lesbian and gay youth within schools. Within educational institutions heterosexuality is one form of cultural capital. Lesbian and gay students who do not possess this 'commodity' are therefore marginalised.

These theories are echoed in the work of Irigaray (1980) and Cixous (1981) in the arena of female subjectivity. They maintain that there is no room for expressions of female voice, sexuality and body within a
dominant male discourse unless it is defined by men. Lesbian identity falls outside male definition and is therefore made invisible.

Research undertaken into the school curriculum indicates that it has been strongly biased towards a white male perspective (Spender, 1982). Recent studies have confirmed these findings. Alton-Lee, Nuthall, Patrick, J (1993) reported that as part of one social studies unit they observed there were 81.7 percent were references to males and 3.9 percent references to females over fifty two hours of class time. The few women who were mentioned were marginalised and derogated. Gender bias was also identified in the teachers selection of who participated in the lesson. 70 percent of public contributions came from boys and only 30 percent from girls. The same study shows that Maori students were also alienated and excluded from the curriculum content and delivery. Their findings show that there are critical links between cultural bias in the curriculum and a range of negative consequences for Maori boys. The consequences included alienation, exclusion, humiliation, victimisation, verbal and physical abuse, self derogation and blame. The researchers point out that the effects of these processes are clearly detrimental to the students learning and sense of self worth.

The silencing of lesbian experience in the curriculum has consequences similar to those that affect heterosexual girls and youth from minority cultures. As the study points out:

It is critical to understand not only the extent to which classroom learning is culturally constructed, but also the consequences for some children when they attempt to manage the problem this cultural construction may pose for them. For
example some children may reject the enacted curriculum as alien, as belonging to 'them' and not 'us', to be kept at a distance from personal understanding and beliefs.

(Alton-Lee et al, 1993: 82)

The effects of this silencing will be dealt with in more detail in Chapter 8.

Recent studies undertaken into the experiences of young lesbians and gay men in schools have placed their findings clearly within the context of the dominant heterosexual culture of schools, reflecting the fact that schools reflect the compulsory heterosexual nature of our society. As a result a silence surrounds lesbian and gay issues in our classrooms and few references about lesbians and gays are made by educators, counsellors and administrators in our schools (Trenchard and Warren, 1984; Sears, 1991). Sears (1991) study revealed that 80 percent of the participants mentioned that there had been no discussion of homosexuality in the classroom and that the topic was avoided by teachers, counsellors and administrators in the schools. These findings are also a feature of this study.

The data reveals that the young lesbians I spoke to were marginalised in the curriculum just as heterosexual young women and students from minority cultures are. This marginalisation manifests itself in the form of silences. The compulsory heterosexuality which is a strong feature of patriarchal western society is reflected in the absence of material that caters to the lives of young lesbians in the classroom. An investigation of the mainstream subject areas and the Health and Sexuality curriculum bear these perspectives out.
Mainstream subject areas

The silence that surrounds the topic of lesbianism was a strong perception on the part of five of the participants who could not remember any mention of lesbianism in the classroom. Melissa could not remember any mention of lesbianism until the senior school:

Melissa: it was either the fifth or the sixth form before we were told, hey, lesbians exist.

Isobel perceived that the silence which surrounded any mention of lesbian or gay issues in the classroom reflected the dominant heterosexual culture of educational institutions:

Isobel: There’s a complete silence about exploration of your sexuality ... Heterosexuality is taken for granted and enforced upon you from ... the point that you start becoming socially aware of yourself and your gender.

Vita felt that the silence which surrounded any mention of lesbianism gave a message that something was wrong with it:

Vita: Well it's been so ingrained that the whole concept is so bad ... that's what I had been brought up with, that most of it was unspoken.
Vita and Melissa felt that the silence around lesbianism meant that schools did not present lesbianism as a viable choice for young women. Isobel connected the repression and isolation of many young lesbians with the silencing of lesbian issues in schools:

Isobel: No recognition means silence, repression and isolation.

Melissa observed that other groups such as women and Maori who did not fit into the dominant white male culture of her school were also silenced. However, she felt that teacher's first priority was dealing with racism and that homophobia was a secondary concern because it was less visible:

Melissa: ...I think they had enough problems with racism and sexism let alone being able to start in on homophobia.

The mentions that were made of lesbian issues were characterised by a lack of directness and vagueness. Despite the fact that Alice was studying a women writer who was known to be bisexual, her teacher only offered veiled hints about the writer's sexuality. She feels she would have benefited from knowing more about this area of the writer's life:

Alice: In the classroom now that you mention it, it was never said... I imagine my teacher would have known ... it was very much skimmed over, her personal life, she never said anything about the relationships she had had, hinted at, definitely hinted at, because that's why I knew I wanted
to find out more about her. It seemed fine to discuss the authors heterosexual partners but not her lesbian ones.

Cathy thought that the lesbian relationship in Alice Walker's novel, *The Color Purple* was dealt with only vaguely by her teacher. However she felt that her approach was good because it was not over-emphasized at the expense of everything else in the book. Vita remembers that when she was in the fifth form, this book was publicly denounced by Lockwood Smith for its use in schools. She demonstrated her resistance to the lack of discussion in school about this by reading it very publicly in her English class:

Vita: My school never addressed why (it was banned). I still made a point of very obviously reading the book as part of my book log in English.

When lesbian sexuality was mentioned it was very infrequently in the students' time at school. Vita and Rachel remembered it only twice in their secondary school education:

Vita: I only remember like doing having anything to do with the subject of sex twice, and that was like in fourth form Science.

Rachel felt that although the topic of lesbianism was raised, it was dealt with very generally. Vita's teacher used an example of a gay male artist as a controversial attention getting device to hook student's interest and felt that the reference marginalised homosexuality:
Vita: The one time I ever heard anything about homosexuality was in Art History, snigger, snigger, Michaelangelo was gay, yet happy to be a really good artist and that was it ... it was one of those attention getting things and ... it just wasn't addressed at all.

Melissa remembers one of her teacher's mentioning acting as lesbian to avoid the attentions of men which contextualised lesbian identity within heterosexual male discourses, thereby marginalising it. However she admired her for mentioning the subject:

Melissa: ... I thought oh, that's incredibly brave..

Jackie remembered that during a fourth form unit on sexuality her teacher was briefly mentioning gay men and he received a question enquiring what lesbians do in bed:

Jackie: ... both (the words) gay and lesbian were used. I think I remember fourth form social studies when we did a unit on sex ... our social studies teacher at the time was probably what you would call a sensitive new age guy, ... and he was talking about gay men... and then he got asked what lesbians do in bed by someone... well he didn't claim to have any idea, he said he wasn't sure but could give a rough idea ...

She felt that the teachers lack of knowledge and preparation on issues of lesbian sexuality reflected the extent to which heterosexuality is
perceived to be the norm in secondary schools. Despite the infrequent mentions made of lesbian issues, they remained memorable for many of the young women. Cathy had a keen interest in how the teacher dealt with the topic and felt disappointed that there was less discussion:

Cathy: ... I was actually quite curious to see how far the class would discuss it ... but it sort of blew over pretty quickly anyway, I was a bit disappointed.

Rachel noted the importance of mentions of lesbian and gay issues in class and found them of direct relevance to herself:

Rachel: ... This was when we were reading, and we were talking about it and she said, 'Did you know that one in ten people are gay?... I just looked around and thought who are the other two?

Negative peer reactions to mentions of lesbianism in class reinforced the feelings of the participants that there was something wrong and unacceptable about being lesbian. Cathy felt that when teachers mentioned lesbians, they were perceived by her peers as uncontrollably sexual and as figures of derision. Their reactions silenced Cathy and made her feel unsafe:

Cathy: I think that just the way it was reacted to by the class didn't really encourage me to discuss my sexuality at the time.
Too Little Too Late: Sexuality and Health Education

... homophobic attitudes and feelings must be understood within a societal context in which ideological beliefs and cultural values prop up existing relations of power and control within society.

(Sears, 1992)

Lisa: .. sex education ... was mainly about pregnancy, smoking, STD's and all that kind of stuff.

Fine (1992) and Sears (1992c) maintain that despite the fact that sexuality abounds in secondary schools, officially it is represented sparsely. In the research she conducted into the sexuality education of adolescent girls, Fine (1992) noted that positive constructions of female desire were conspicuously absent from the sexuality curriculum. Instead, she argued, current sexuality education presents young women with views of female sexuality in which they learn to defend themselves against active male sexuality. In many cases Fine asserts that the underlying principal of the current sexuality curriculum is that if you do not talk about it then it is less likely to happen. Citing the work of Irigaray (1980) and Cixous (1981), Fine argues that expressions of female sexual desire, including lesbianism, are unlikely to be heard within a male defined discourse. She concludes by asserting:

A self-critical analysis of the fundamental ways in which we teach children not to betray their own voices is critical.

(Fine 1992: 138)
Sears (1992c) maintains that the failure of schools to address lesbian and gay issues and to integrate them into the curriculum is due in some part to the threat that same sex relations pose to the dominant culture. He points out that few studies of gender socialisation have addressed the connections between gender identity and sexual identity. His 1991 study revealed that sexuality was taught within the context of STD's and AID's. None of the young lesbian women he interviewed had experienced any form of sexuality education that mentioned lesbianism. Similar findings are reflected in this study.
In Melissa's and Alice's first schools, sexuality was not dealt with until the fifth and sixth form. Four of the young women felt that the whole area of sexuality was dealt with inadequately. They commented on the infrequency of information and Rachel noted that the fact that biological identification and processes were dealt with at the expense of relationships:

Rachel: The only thing that I can remember is fourth form health and that was all about body organs and stuff like that, that was basic, things that made you aware of what was going on with your body like your period.

Isobel noted that the sexuality curriculum constructed female sexuality as a problem. This resulted in her feeling bad about herself as a young woman:

Isobel: Everything in sex education is pathologised. Your bodily functions are treated as a problems. The problems of contraception menstruation etc. I had a negative sensation about these functions and things that were happening to me.

All the participants felt that all students were assumed to be heterosexual and that because of that no mention was made of lesbianism:

Melissa: They concentrated a lot on saying no, STD's and contraception
Vita observed that despite the outbreak of AIDS, issues that affect lesbian and gay sexuality were not discussed. The inadequacy of sexuality education was particularly commented on by Vita and Cathy, who attended Catholic schools. In Vita's school, any teaching of sexuality was in Religious education and the content was strictly heterosexual. Cathy observed that contraception was a forbidden topic let alone homosexuality:

Cathy: Well being a Catholic school it was all very heterosexual and all very not until we're married and then without contraception ... I remember in some of the books we had in science they actually stuck the pages with stuff about contraception together.

Isobel felt that the lack of acknowledgement of lesbianism as a positive choice limited her opportunity for personal growth:

Isobel: There was no option to discover relationships that could possibly be healthier and more enriching to them.... There was no acknowledgement.

Vita thought that a lack of information prevented sexuality and health teachers from dealing with lesbian and gay sexuality. She suggested that many teachers would feel relieved about the lack of information available because they would find it uncomfortable to discuss lesbian or gay sexuality:
Vita: ... if it wasn't mentioned then it didn't exist and they didn't have to discuss it.

The limited mentions that were made of homosexuality occurred within a male context that marginalised lesbian identity (Fine, 1992). In Jackie's case, homosexuality was referred to but only as it pertained to men:

Jackie: ... homosexuality was mentioned but for men basically.

Melissa attended a health seminar in which a school nurse alluded to lesbian sexuality in what she felt was a disappointingly oblique way:

Melissa: In the fifth form or the sixth form. ... (we had) health seminars... and they had one on Sexuality. (I) was so disappointed because it was just so vague... I guess she was trying to say that it was OK to be lesbian... I think that's what she was gently trying to push.
After Cathy and Jackie had left school they heard that their schools organised speakers to came into the school to talk about same sex attractions:

Cathy: I only heard about it afterwards from ... my ex-partner, who was actually one of the people who spoke to the classes and a couple of friends who were in the same group. But apparently it went down really well.

Cathy acknowledged the role of two progressive staff members at her school who organised the event:

Cathy: I'd say at a guess it would have been the careers adviser and the guidance counsellor who got them along together. They were actually a really good team. They sort of got quite a few things going round the school like that.

Jackie felt this was a positive thing to do and wished that she had been able to benefit from the session:

Jackie: I wished that that's what they had done while I was there, that I think is invaluable, seeing someone roughly your own age comfortable and able to talk about it in front of people and something where people could (have) written down questions they wanted to ask
The School Library

Jackie: ... you would have to go up to the library office and say 'Can I have that folder on homosexuality please, the one with all the dust on it that no one ever asks for?'

The invisibility of lesbian content in the mainstream subject areas and the Sexuality curriculum extended to school libraries. The lack of material was complicated by the fact that such material was often inaccessible and a lesbian student would be readily identified by the librarians and their peers when the material was issued.

Eight of the participants had attempted to find information on lesbian sexuality in their school libraries. Seven of them had school libraries which contained no information about lesbian issues.

Jackie and Cathy avoided using the school library to find out information about sexuality because she knew there was nothing there that would be useful to her:

Jackie: Not to the school library because they didn't have anything.

Cathy: I used ... to look for books in the library at (school) and my search was fruitless.

Alice and Toni both noted the lack of mentions of lesbians within sexuality books:
Alice: Not very many, there were all kind of health issues rather than sexuality ... I don't think I ever bothered looking at those ones because they were so few of them.

Toni resorted to dictionaries and encyclopedias:

Toni: Oh no, there was only one book in the school library that I found, and the only other mention I could ever find was like a dictionary or encyclopaedia in the school library

Vita found out that books concerning any kind of sexuality were scarce and those that did exist had a heterosexual focus:

Vita: I think there may have been five (books) in the entire library.... to do with sex and sexuality (and they were) heterosexual of course!

She also perceived that there was a lack of current vertical file material on sexuality. Melissa was comforted by the little information that she found but felt that the brevity of the references were unsatisfactory:

Melissa: In health books I guess.... They were just about, lesbians exist. They don't have two horns or 2 heads, but that would only be a couple of pages in a book or a paragraph.

The issue was further complicated by the fact that that seven of the participants would have felt uncomfortable taking the resources out. Rachel and Melissa were worried about the reactions of staff and their peers. Toni felt uncomfortable because the librarian knew her mother
and Toni didn't want her to know she was a lesbian. Rachel felt that if she had taken out a book it would have revealed her lesbianism, so they chose not to use the school library:

Rachel: I guess because people would click on straight away that I was gay. I'd do my best not to do anything like going to the library and getting a book basically because I don't want to jeopardise myself I guess.

At one more progressive school the library subscribed to Broadsheet, a feminist magazine. Having access to this material made Alice feel positive and affirmed as a young lesbian:

Alice: Oh I used to sit in the library and ... read Broadsheet, I used to steal them all from the library and then sneak them back in, after I had read them all.... Because it had all the articles about what I wanted to read about, general political issues and social issues and stuff about young lesbians and older lesbians and lesbians everywhere.
CHAPTER 4: CONTEXTS: LEGISLATION, SCHOOL COMMUNITIES AND FAMILY

This chapter explores the global, national and local contexts within which the experiences of lesbian students in educational institutions are positioned. Educational and Human Rights legislation is outlined as well as developments which support lesbian and gay youth and educationalists within New Zealand. Finally, school communities and family are examined as contexts within which the young lesbians need to be situated.

Legislation

United Kingdom

Squirrell (1989) maintains that on the issue of sexual orientation in schools there is a lack of sensible writing to counter-balance the sensationalism of the press and parliament in the United Kingdom. She perceived that this was exacerbated by New Right philosophies and a rise in Christian fundamentalism which bred a new conservatism which doesn’t only make life difficult for lesbians, it can often make it dangerous.

The most blatant example of this has been the heterosexist legislation in the form of Clause 28 of the Local Government Act. It has effectively legislated against lesbians and gays in schools and stifled mention of the subject in any aspect of the curriculum. It states:

(1) A local authority shall not:
(a) Intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality.
(b) Promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship.

(Harris, 1990: 5 & 6)

Australia

In 1992 The Northern Territory passed an Anti-discrimination Act after lesbian and gay activists had fought a campaign demanding that legislation be put in place to protect discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation. While the legislation was passed, there were notable exemptions which related to educationalists. These exemptions specifically stated that, in order to protect the physical and psychological needs of children, workers involved in the instruction, care and supervision of children were not protected from discrimination on the grounds of their sexuality. This exemption clause was based on The Queensland Anti-discrimination Act which had recently been passed.\(^1\) It assumed a correlation between homosexuality and child sexual assault and that lesbian and gay teachers will be actively be recruiting youth. A teacher in Melbourne was fired for being a lesbian in 1992.\(^2\)

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\(^1\)Alternative law Journal. Vol 18, No.2 April 1993
\(^2\)Gay Teachers meet I.T.A, in the Sydney Star Observer 21/8/92
The New Zealand Context

The Homosexual Law Reform Bill of 1986

Historically in New Zealand, gay men have had support from lesbians in pushing for legislation to decriminalise male homosexuality. This has occurred despite the fact that lesbian's by virtue of their invisibility, have scarcely been mentioned. Queen Victoria's assertion that there was no need to criminalise lesbian sexuality because it was an impossibility is generally regarded as the reason that lesbian sex has not been perceived as a criminal act (Jackson, 1989). This background proved to be important during the Homosexual Law Reform campaign of 1986.

Part one of the Bill concerned lowering the age of consent for gay male sexual activity and had nothing to do with lesbians. Part two, on the other hand, included clauses to ensure equal rights and non-discrimination for lesbians and gay men. It was on the basis of Part two of the Bill that lesbians became involved. Late in the campaign it was obvious that both Parts of the Bill would not be passed and it became apparent for strategic reasons that Part two would be sacrificed to enable part one to be passed.3

As in other decriminalisation cases overseas (Smith, 1992), it appeared that more emphasis was placed on decriminalisation for gay men and lesbian issues were less important. This reinforced the traditional invisibility of lesbians within the gay rights movement and western society at large and produced a great deal of dissatisfaction amongst

3Personal conversation with Shane Town 26/4/94 who was involved in this campaign.
lesbians involved in the campaign. Since this time, the difficulties that gay men have had in passing legislation to protect the status of HIV and AIDS sufferers has given them some insight into the position of lesbian women and recognise the difficulties that they face.\(^4\)

In 1993 that the Human Rights Act was passed, outlawing discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and HIV status. There were no exemption clauses in the Act. Compared to other countries such as United Kingdom and the Northern States of Australia, this legislation is remarkably progressive. However, educationalists have queried the extent to which it will affect the current homophobic climate in schools. Teachers interviewed by Quinlivan (1992), felt that the legislation would not make them feel any more confident to reveal their sexuality at school, commenting that legislation is not necessarily going to create less of a homophobic environment in schools or make them any safer to work in.

School Legislation

School charters are a management document for the entire school. In this document the school outlines its aims and provides guidelines to demonstrate how a school would achieve them in order to provide a learning environment where all students will attain their full potential. It is within this context that the needs of lesbian and gay students in schools should be considered. School charters have undergone many changes in the last six years and I intend to outline these in order to emphasise that schools should have policies in place to support the needs of lesbian and gay youth in schools.

\(^4\)Ibid
As part of the 1988 Tomorrows Schools legislation, the Labour government made it compulsory for schools to have within their charters, equity guidelines that showed that the school was adhering to the principles of the Treaty Of Waitangi as well as addressing issues of gender and ethnicity. Under the umbrella of the Ministry of Education, The Education Review Office was to audit schools on the basis of how well schools met those guidelines.

Between 1988 and 1990, the National Party opposition debated those issues, arguing that the Labour government had an agenda of social engineering. And in 1991 Lockwood Smith, as the Minister of Education, introduced the Education Amendment Act which removed the compulsory equity policy clause. As a result, the Education Review Office’s focus was no longer on equity.

Up until that point targeted funding for equity priorities had been allocated to schools that had a large number of disadvantaged students. These funds had to be directed specifically for the benefits of the disadvantaged students. However, after the 1991 Act the targeted funding went straight into the school’s bulk operating fund and Boards could spend it on whatever they liked.

It was in this political climate that Lockwood Smith advocated banning the teaching of Alice Walker’s Pulitzer Prize winning novel The Color Purple in English classrooms on the grounds that it: "Contains passages of violence, incest and lesbianism." 5.
By linking violence and incest to lesbianism he suggests that lesbian issues are similar to sexual and physical abuse and it is dangerous and sick therefore young people need to be protected from such material.

The lack of compulsory equity policies in school charters meant that it was now up to local Boards of Trustees to deal with equity issues within their schools and the government could then abdicate its responsibility in this field. Gordon et al's 1994 study has proved that schools are not able to meet the equity needs of students at a local level. This study reveals that because schools are short of resources, they are concentrating on the basics. While the second phase of the study revealed that less wealthy schools were concerned at their lack of action on equity issues, they neither had the resources or the personnel expertise to improve the situation. In a context such as this it is unlikely that lesbian students needs are being met. However in the last two years there have been some positive initiatives that mean that such support may gradually be more forthcoming.

In April 1993, the Ministry of Education produced a document called School Charters and The Revised National Guidelines. ⁵ The National Education Guidelines outline ten educational goals for schools. They form the basis of the contract between Boards of Trustees and the Crown and will be audited and reviewed by the Education Review Office. Three of the goals are relevant to lesbian and gay youth:

1. The highest standards of achievement, through programmes which enable all students to reach their full potential as

⁵ This was published in the Education Gazette 29/4/93
individuals and to develop the values needed to become full members of New Zealand society.

2. Equality of educational opportunity for all New Zealanders by identifying and removing all barriers to achievement.

7. Success in their learning for those with special needs by ensuring that they are identified and receive appropriate support.

(Education Gazette 29/4/93: 3 & 4)

In addition to the educational goals outlined in the document, National Administration Guidelines were also specified. These also contained clauses relevant to lesbian and gay youth:

5. Each Board of Trustees is also required to:
   1. Provide a safe physical and emotional environment for students. (my italics)
   2. Comply in full with any legislation currently in force or that may be developed to ensure the safety of students and employees.

These legislative changes mean that schools will now be required by the Education review office to demonstrate how the needs of all students, including lesbian and gay students are being met. In addition, under the Human Rights legislation, schools have an obligation not to discriminate on the grounds of sexual orientation. Of course having policy in place does not necessarily mean that attitudes change within schools (Quinlivan, 1992) and it will be interesting to see the ways in which Boards of Trustees apply the policy to the lesbian and gay students who attend their schools in the future. My findings suggest, that with a few notable exceptions, this has not been happening.
The second development to highlight the issues that lesbian and gay teachers and students face in schools has come from lesbian and gay educators themselves. In 1993 GLEE (Gays and Lesbians Everywhere in Education) was established. Its primary aims were to support lesbian and gay educators and to educate schools and the wider community about the issues that lesbian and gay teachers and students face in educational institutions. Over its short life, the organisation has had a high public profile with branches in four of the main centres. It has conducted workshops for counsellors, liaised with the PPTA over a safe schools for lesbians and gays initiative and is currently undertaking a trial with the Human Rights Commission to run workshops with Boards of Trustees on issues that affect lesbian and gay youth in schools. GLEE has raised the profile of lesbians and gays in education and in doing so collided with a secondary school Principal who mistakenly accused them of wanting to set up a support group in his school. Despite his misgivings two support groups are known to be currently operating in North Island schools.

I have outlined the current legislation and educational developments that provide an international and New Zealand context for the experiences of the young lesbian women who participated in this project. On a local level, school communities have a complex culture of their own. These cultures play a role in determining the extent to which the lesbian students felt safe in their schools.

School Communities

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7 Personal conversation with PPTA Womens Officer, 24/4/94
Alice: Just having all these role models at school, and all this information that was so accessible, it gave me a feeling ... that everything was okay. You know it wasn't something really strange that was happening.

Toni: Blaketown is the most homophobic town on the face of the earth... and like anything remotely out of what they consider normal is just completely wrong. (There’s).... absolutely no such thing (as lesbians), they don't exist ... so you couldn't talk about it.

The young women in this study attended a wide range of schools. Several of them had changed schools, either because they were unhappy there or their families moved. Each of these institutions has a complex cultural mix of their own. The cultures within each school were determined by its geographical position, gender mix, the variety of class backgrounds and racial communities that the students are drawn from, the school ethos, the leadership style of the principal and the nature of the staff.

Nine of the ten participants who attended single sex girls schools perceived them as environments where any discussion of lesbianism was discouraged. One reason that they gave for this was the predominantly female composition of their schools. The all female environment of a girls school has traditionally been considered as a breeding ground of lesbian activity and as a result a fear surrounds the issue of lesbianism in many single sex schools (Faraday, 1989). Within this context, the interviewees believed that lesbian issues were silenced
and matters that were not open for discussion. The one exception to this thread was the school that Belinda attended. The reasons for her experiences will be examined in more detail in Chapter 9.

The last of the contexts that are taken into consideration in this chapter is the family circumstances of the participants. They played a large role in determining the extent of support that the young lesbians received in coming to terms with their emerging sexual identities.

Three of the participants who attended Catholic schools remarked on the role that Catholicism played in silencing any discussion of sexuality generally, let alone references to lesbian and gay sexuality.

Urban and Rural schools

Urban co-educational schools were perceived to be progressive by those participants who attended them. Moving to less conservative co-educational schools saved Alice's and Vita's mental health. Melissa also benefited from attended an urban co-educational recently. In Vita's case the change only occurred after she had completed her secondary education:

Vita: Thank God I actually went from that like a year later... to a school ... who cares and that sort of thing and that was the best education I had from that social aspect.... it came at the right time too, because I don't know if it would have happened if I hadn't been confronted with it as I was, I don't think I would be at the stage I am now.
Vita and Alice perceived the staff and school environment to be warm and inclusive and as a result felt more accepted and comfortable with their sexuality than they had in their previous schools:

Alice: The teachers seemed really aware ... their whole kind of language that they spoke was very inclusive of everybody, race, sexual orientation, everything, everybody was really careful not to say anything that was discriminatory.

Vita didn't tell her friends she was a lesbian until she was in what she saw as a more supportive and liberal environment in 1992:

Vita: some other friends of mine who I was with they were more ... accepting (of) what I was interested in doing ... some of them were prone to be less mainstream than others and um so you could see that there was more people like that.

She decided not to tell her catholic school friends until later perceiving that after they had left the sheltered atmosphere of the catholic school they may have more liberal attitudes:

Vita: My old friends were only told once they'd been out in the real world a lot later. I think it was then they could be more prepared and accepting, having been away from the catholic school sheltering bubble.

Last year Melissa returned to an urban co-educational school. She noted a huge change for the better in this environment compared to the
school she had attended in a rural town. There were out lesbian teachers and she perceived that the school atmosphere was more open and accepting of lesbians:

Melissa: It was interesting for me to compare (my old school) with the urban state co-educational school (I returned to school for half a year last year). There were two lesbian students that I heard of and an out lesbian teacher. The students I met were pretty liberal and pretty on to it politically. I started a few debates/discussions about women, lesbians, feminism and was happily surprised about the degree of knowledge, interest, openness and support from both students and teachers. Streets ahead of my old school and very heartening.

On the other hand, Toni and Melissa's feelings of isolation as young lesbians were exacerbated by the homophobic attitudes of the rural and provincial communities they lived in:

Melissa: When I was working with my friend Karen... somehow the topic of lesbians came up and she said, “Uh! You're not one are you?”. She asked me twice and really wasn't sure if I was telling the truth. Because I was so supportive of lesbians, she assumed I was lesbian and was quite unsure and suspicious. I found that to be indicative of the general towns’ attitude. Even talking about lesbians could get you in a lot of hot water.
This silence around the issue of lesbianism in a rural town, prevented Toni from finding out any information out about being lesbian:

Toni: (It was) damn near impossible sort of to find (out about) because it didn't exist ... there was a lack of information I suppose, a lack of anyone to go to.

Contact with the telephone counselling service Gayline in the nearest city provided the initial contact with the lesbian and gay community for her and lessened her sense of rural isolation:

Toni: (Gayline) was like reach out and touch somebody, there is somebody else there, you know, so yes, it was (very important)

Melissa pointed out that lesbian teachers were also at risk of censure living in rural communities:

Melissa: ... in a small community she lived in where a young woman fell in love with her, one of the students ... she got shit from the other teachers and adults.

Single Sex Girls Schools

As Clothier, (1993) and Jones, (1988) noted, Spender's (1982) assertion that single sex girls schools provide young women with a superior learning environment failed to take into account that these schools still reflect the dominant white male heterosexual discourse. Therefore lesbian students will not feel any more comfortable in an all female
environment. In addition, the all female environments of single sex girls schools heightened the sensitivity of staff and students towards lesbian issues. Melissa felt that this awareness silenced any open discussion:

Melissa: (being a lesbian wasn't talked about)... I think possibly because it was a single sex school. It was more paranoia I guess around the possibility of being lesbian even though it wasn't really spoken.

In Vita's mind, these attitudes resulted in girls schools becoming reactionary and discriminatory environments for lesbians:

Vita: (It's) like the last bastion of homophobia almost, it's just the worst place for that sort of thing because it is so much on everyone's minds.

Vita perceived that the traditional myth that single sex schools are breeding grounds for lesbian activity because they were such exclusively female environments was a contributing factor in the silencing of lesbian issues in girls schools:

Vita: ... they don't talk about it because it is so scary. They think, Oh my god this is just the environment (it could happen in)

**Family**

Research suggests that one of the most difficult tasks that confronts a young lesbian or gay male is disclosing their sexual identity to their
parents or caregivers (Sears, 1991). Isobel, Vita and Belinda perceived ‘family’ support as an important factor in helping them facing up to their lesbian identity:

Isobel: I had a very strong identity because I was living in a self created environment where the friends I was living with were my family ... when I went back to school in the final year... I was really strong about myself.

Vita: Once I knew that I had like that approval, then that made me feel a lot more confident.

Belinda felt that she gained a lot of support from her mother who was also a lesbian:

Belinda: I found it really easy, coming out as a lesbian at home. Mum’s been really supportive.. I wouldn't be as confident about coming out as a lesbian ... When I need someone to talk to Mum’s the person I go to ... I know that I’m really supported, that I can really face anything.

Three of the young women's families did not know they were lesbians at the time of the interviews. Despite feeling that she would prefer not hide her lesbianism from her family, Alice preferred to keep it that way at the moment:

Alice: my lesbianism remains a silent issue, at least at home anyway.... I don't like having to do it.
She found that it affected her privacy and the relationship she has with her lover's mother:

Alice: It is difficult. Like I have to be careful with bits of paper I leave around and stuff like that. The worst thing I've encountered so far though, is trying to phone my lover. She is out about her and me to her mother and her mother can't deal with it, like she's just really cold to me on the phone.

Toni stayed silent about her lesbianism with her parent because she feared rejection from family and friends:

Toni: I couldn't be (open), it was just as simple as that, I think maybe it was part fear, of (the) reaction (from) .. anybody I cared enough about .. like Mum ... The thought that she might kick me out of the family scared me. I need my family, no matter how much I sometimes hate them I love them really. (I was also worried about what my).... best friends... the people at school (would think).

Melissa felt that growing up in a family which hadn't talked made disclosing to her parents much more difficult:

Melissa: My family never talk about things, talking about how you feel was the main one, and that was pummelled into me basically.
She felt this was compounded by the fact that they were Catholics and took a strong moral stance against homosexuality:

Melissa: ... it kept me quiet ... although they never said anything condemning of homosexuals, I assumed because we were Catholic they would automatically be against it for religious reasons.
Educators significantly influence the experiences of these boys and girls in school. It is the educator who chooses how to teach the prescribed sexuality curriculum: it is the educator who challenges or winks at homophobic comments or jokes among students; it is the educator who comforts or ignores a student suffering from the sexist tirades of peers or doubts about her sexual identity...

(Sears, 1992c:61)

Rachel: I knew that I could always talk to (teachers) about anything except the fact that I was gay.

Alice: I was trying to work out for myself if I was a lesbian or not and then these people that I admired turned out to be a lesbian too and it was kind of reassuring thing, I think, oh if they are, made me feel happier about me.

Teachers and counsellors play an important role in creating a climate of safety and acceptance of difference in schools. As adults, they are in a strong position to influence student attitudes and many students take their cues from the adults they work with at school. Alton-Lee et al (1993) highlighted the role that teachers play in unconsciously structuring the dominant discourse within the classroom.

Despite the potential for teachers and counsellors to support lesbian and gay students, the studies investigating the attitudes of secondary school educators and guidance counsellors suggest that they both lack the information and sensitivity needed to address the needs of students
with same sex attractions (Khayatt, 1994; Sears 1991; Stapp, 1992; Trenchard and Warren, 1984).

Sears' 1991 study revealed that educators displayed a lack of awareness of lesbian and gay sexuality and received little training to deal with issues that may face lesbian and gay youth. The participants in his study felt that teachers demonstrated a detachment from personal concerns and social issues and were unwilling to communicate with students. In some cases the interviewees felt that teachers had displayed cruelty and maliciousness in their references to lesbian and gay issues in the classroom. Educators were also found to confront racial but not sexual slurs, giving the message that sexuality was not as important. However, there were some positive experiences with educators within schools that lesbian and gay adolescents discussed.

In his 1992 study Sears (1992b) went on to examine the attitudes of 483 guidance counsellors and 258 prospective teachers. The findings of this study revealed that while often counsellors and to a lesser extent teachers, expressed the feeling that they should be more pro-active to support the welfare of all students, that due to their high levels of ignorance fear and prejudice their professional support was negligible. My findings reinforced Sears results.

This chapter in addition to investigating the perceptions that the participants had of heterosexual teachers and counsellors in their schools, will also outline the roles that lesbian and gay teachers played in their school experiences. Studies have revealed that the dynamics that operate between lesbian teachers and students are complex and layered because of the lack of safety experienced by them within
heterosexist environments (Squirrell, 1988; Khayatt, 1993; Quinlivan, 1993). This chapter discusses some of the complexities that arise for both students and teachers within this context.

Six of the young women felt that many of their teachers and counsellors were uncomfortable and in some cases, judgemental in these attitudes towards homosexuality and that their negative attitudes spilled over into the classroom. It was the perceived prevalence of teachers homophobic attitudes that prevented many of the participants from approaching a teacher or guidance counsellor in the first instance.

However, a small number of the young women interviewed received a great deal of support from strong women teachers and counsellors who they perceived as important role models. This support played an crucial role in improving the school experiences of those participants.

Toni felt that some of her teachers revealed attitudes which openly demonstrated that being lesbian or gay was unacceptable:

Toni: There are a few who were quite obviously prejudiced about some things... it is basically just a feeling I suppose but like the looks on their faces when you mentioned it, that kind of thing.

Vita perceived the silence and unacceptability that surrounded the subject of lesbian or gay issues in their schools prevented her from raising the issue:
Vita: ... subconsciously I was guarding something that you just couldn't talk about.

Isobel felt very hurt when a teacher that she trusted silently colluded with the rest of her classmates against her, implying that she may have been a lesbian:

Isobel: There was one other time which was where she really hurt me... and we were doing that really yucky getting to know you thing in class ... I turned around to this guy and he said 'So, have you had any boyfriends?' and I just remember hearing this silence in the class and all these giggles and (the teacher) turning around from the blackboard and looking straight at me and giving me this really kind of sly grin of complicity but with them not with me. Like this sort of 'Ha, they've got you now'. I remember it really hurting and I was devastated.

That same teacher also alluded to the fact that Isobel could perhaps be a lesbian even though she may be unaware of it at the time. Isobel felt that she risked being exposed and as a result, the teacher's allusion made her feel vulnerable and afraid:

Isobel: ... she said to me quite out of the blue ... 'You know, I can look around a classroom and see who the gay and lesbian students are as clear as day' and I can remember feeling every single muscle in my body just tensing up and just really quickly changing the subject.
However, the interviewees recalled many positive experiences with their teachers. Isobel, Melissa, Vita and Rachel remembered strong women teachers who served as role models and in some cases provided important support. Belinda had support from many of her heterosexual teachers. Along with Jackie and Alice, she also knew lesbian and gay teachers. These adults provided role models for the young women and they perceived themselves to have gained immeasurably from the advice and assistance that 'out' lesbian and gay teachers were able to offer.

Sears (1992c) maintains that role models are critical for the entire student population, not just lesbian and gay students because their presence can create a climate of tolerance and acceptance of difference in schools.

Rosenthal (1993) highlights the importance of role models for adolescents in modelling behaviour they may choose to emulate. This was the case for many of the interviewees. Because many of these young women were drawn towards women, they saw strong female teachers as important role models:

Melissa: I was very women orientated and I was attracted to them as strong women teachers.

Isobel: My Classics teacher ... was like the modern day equivalent of Athene with flashing eyes ... She was quite amazing and she even wore her make up like war paint and this flaming red hair, no one messed around with her. I took to referring to them (all) as the strong women of English faculty.
Vita's female teachers were important to her because they presented images of things she wanted to become herself:

Vita: All of them really seemed to be going places and ... that's what I wanted of course and hoped it would rub off ...

Isobel received a great deal of support from her female teachers in her later years of school:

Isobel: ... they were really supportive of me like they'd send me cards with funny little Mary Leunig cartoons on them saying 'You have the passion, we have the faith ... get out there and do it.'

Rachel felt that she related better to adults than to her peers because of her sexuality:

Rachel: I've always gotten on well with my teachers .... because of their maturity. ... I've always felt more trusting of them because I had that need for their maturity....

**Lesbian and Gay Teachers**

There is an increasingly large body of literature which suggests that schools are unsafe places for most lesbian and gay teachers to openly declare their sexuality. (Khayatt, 1992; Quinlivan, 1993). One reason for this is the disproved but commonly held notion that there is a connection between paedophilia and homosexuality (Khayatt, 1992). As
a result many lesbian and gay teachers are perceived by parents, students and colleagues as perverts preying on vulnerable youth.

Teachers are silenced and few feel safe enough to openly declare their sexuality in their workplaces. As a result few role models exist for lesbian and gay students and they also receive the message that there is something inherently wrong in being either lesbian or gay.

Despite the fact that few of the interviewees knew of 'out' lesbian teachers, Belinda and Melissa believed that they could often readily identify their lesbian teachers:

Belinda: She was my Social studies teacher and I thought she was a dyke straight away when I first saw her.

Melissa: I knew that there was something about her that didn't quite, that wasn't the same as the other women teachers, but I couldn't put my finger on what it might be, but I did feel a kind of kinship with her I guess ...

Rumours circulated amongst the students about suspected lesbian teachers:

Toni: ... we were talking about rumours and I told her how many of the teachers were supposed to be gay...

These rumours were largely based on the stereotyped physical appearance of the teacher and their marital status:
Belinda: ... my teacher well... she's a closet dyke ... I wouldn't think she was a lesbian myself but that's stereotyped really ... you wouldn't think it ... but there are rumours going round about her as well that she is a lesbian.

While rumours of lesbian teachers were comforting to Toni, she also sensed that this meant that being a lesbian was unacceptable:

Toni: Oh it was a double sword, on one side it was like well if they are then I am not alone, but on the other side it was that this was obviously a bad thing, or we wouldn't be hearing about it... what annoys me is not that the possibility that they may be, but the obvious way it matters that they are, to people, that was what pissed me off.

Contact with the lesbian, gay and feminist communities enabled three of the participants to know definitely who the lesbian teachers were.

Belinda: Yes, there's two in my school that I know of and that know about me I'm quite sure of .... I know one of them's a lesbian because I know her personally, the other guy, Mr McKenzie ... I know because I got told by the other teacher.

Belinda felt disappointed that most of the lesbian teachers known by her were silent and closeted at school because she had no-one to identify with:
Belinda: No teachers at my school are out which is quite a disappointment actually because it would be really neat.

She recognised that a lesbian teacher who is a personal friend of hers remained remote from her at school in order to protect her career. Nevertheless, she found the distancing difficult to deal with:

Belinda: At school she's really distant, you know? She doesn't really talk to me. She's scared of people. She just freaks out ... scared of losing her job really.

Khayatt (1993) and Quinlivan (1993) both point out that many students and parents still confuse homosexuality and paedophilia. Belinda and Melissa understood that lesbian teachers known to them stayed distant to avoid any allegations of sexual impropriety made by others. This indicates how ingrained the mythical connection between homosexuality and paedophilia is in many people's minds:

Belinda: ... in school we hardly ever see each other and she doesn't really talk to me that much ... it's like if people knew that we knew each other, they ... might get the wrong idea or something would happen

Melissa: ... so I think partly they were a bit cautious, they didn't want to be accused of converting me I suppose, or perverting me or something like that.
At Vita's school, one teacher rumoured to be a lesbian was perceived as predatory by students:

Vita: I don't know how many times I think I was dared to go and ask her if she was gay but I never did... it was a joke like 'She's after you', or whatever and ... it was always a teasing point.

In contrast to the rest of the interviewees, Rachel felt safe with closeted teachers because she felt her own lesbian identity would be less likely to be revealed:

Rachel: No. I liked the fact that they didn't because then it was no big deal me being seen talking to them or anything like that, I mean no one could jump to conclusions.

Rachel used her friendship with a lesbian teacher to find out about the lesbian and gay communities. She perceived that through this lesbian teacher she was able to safely explore issues about her lesbian sexuality:

Rachel: I knew I was a lesbian ... I want(ed) to find out more about what goes on with older people whether there are a lot of gay people out there or not. Basically doing some market research.... they were really good listeners and quite supportive of you as a person.
Belinda had a lesbian teacher at her school as a friend. Outside school, the teacher was a person she could identify with and use as a valuable sounding board for the issues she was confronting as a young lesbian:

Belinda: I can really trust (her) and I talk to her a lot about myself as well, how I feel and stuff and problems I have which is really good to have someone to talk to ... this woman is a lesbian so its good for me that I talk to her as well because she knows how I feel.

Out Lesbian Teachers

Lesbian teachers taught at the last school that Alice attended. In addition to creating an atmosphere that was safe for her as a young lesbian, they were also positive role models:

Alice: I used to do a lot of 'dyke spotting' about school though, you know, like looking out for the tell-tale stickers on cars and the occasional lesbian students who'd hold hands around school. It sort of gave me a feeling of security and confidence seeing these wonderful lesbian women around school, both teachers and students.

This modelling created a safe and affirmative environment for her to come to terms with her own sexuality:

Alice: It made the environment really supportive and it ... I felt like it was a really normal thing. So I never had to deal
with the feelings of being a lesbian as something deviant or something abnormal at least not at school anyway.

Alice reported that lesbian teachers were accepted by colleagues and students alike at her school and some chose to openly declare their sexuality. Seeing lesbian teachers at lesbian venues made Alice feel good about herself and part of a wider lesbian community. Open lesbian teachers reinforced Alice and Melissa's emerging lesbian identities and made them feel positive about themselves as young lesbians:

Melissa: I guess Sarah the teacher ... having her about was quite affirming ... that probably had the effect of speeding up the process of coming out as a lesbian.

Melissa felt that it was the knowledge of the existence of lesbians that helped to prevent her attempting suicide:

Melissa: I did see lesbian women that from the outside looking in ... had good lives so partly that's what saved my life, seeing that I could have a happy life, that it could be better than what it was.

Jackie and Vita both attended schools that had gay teachers working on the staff. Because such a silence surrounded the issue of lesbians and gays at Vita's school, the teacher's gayness was identified by what she perceived as his stereotyped appearance and through rumours rather than actual fact:
Vita: You could tell, he was stereotypical and of course by rumour we knew he was but again it was just never brought up.

Jackie had an openly gay teacher in the sixth form. Because she was not comfortable yet with her own sexuality, she felt that he was more of a threat than a support to her with her peers in the classroom situation:

Jackie: Well I didn't want to be singled out by (him) ... I wasn't really a 100 percent comfortable, or anything like a 100 percent, I didn't want him to draw any attention to me if at all possible, I was quite happy to sit in the background and say nothing if I possibly could.

However, outside class, he discreetly supported her by giving her books to read and introducing her to lesbian and gay community activities including a support group for young lesbians and gay men:

Jackie: He knew and I knew that he knew but no one was going to say it so it was... he just said you can borrow this book of mine ... and talked to me about dances that were happening at Varsity at that time. When the next one was on, he was quite prepared to take me along ... and he told me about Crosses and Arrows (a support group for young lesbians and gays).
School Guidance Counsellors

The role of the guidance counsellor in a school is to support the students and staff. Despite this role, Sears study (1992b) suggests that many school guidance counsellors are poorly equipped to deal with the needs of lesbian and gay students and teachers in schools.

Two thirds of the school counsellors expressed negative attitudes about homosexuality and few indicated they would feel positive in a discussion of homosexuality with a student. Gay and lesbian students in previous studies have identified lack of information and lack of trust and confidentiality as stumbling blocks to confiding in counsellors (Sears, 1991; Stapp, 1992). With some exceptions, my findings confirmed these patterns.

While seven of the young women I interviewed perceived counsellors to be ill informed, untrustworthy and not worth talking to, others like Cathy, Jackie and Belinda were lucky enough to have the support of guidance counsellors who enabled them feel more comfortable and positive about themselves as young lesbians.

Melissa's feelings of isolation silenced her and prevented her from approaching the school counsellor because she feared a negative reaction:

Melissa: I assumed I was the only one who might be wondering ... that nobody would have done that and that (the counsellor) never would have experienced it ever, I always thought that she'd drop dead if I said anything.
Lisa felt that the guidance counsellors at her school were busy dealing with those students who openly manifested behavioural problems. She admitted that confiding her unhappiness to a counsellor would mean that she would lose the tenuous control over her feelings that she thought she possessed:

Lisa: I did tend not to want to go and talk to them because I knew that I'd probably get upset .... at the time I didn't like being upset in front of others.

In retrospect, she realised that this area of her life was too painful to uncover and that it was easier not to deal with it:

Lisa: I guess I didn't want to know. At the time I thought I was dealing with it, but I wasn't.

Isobel, Belinda, Vita and Rachel chose not to see a guidance counsellor because they felt that being a lesbian was an issue that they ultimately needed to come to terms with themselves:

Vita: Because I guess I would've felt like it was something I had to sort through, that it was my own thing. Like it was really personal and it wasn't a problem.

Alice: Because I think I felt like I wanted to do it for myself anyway. Just sort through my own head.
Three of the participants perceived their school counsellors to be untrustworthy and lacking in confidentiality. For these reasons they did not approach them:

Isobel: Didn't trust him. From the very first minute I set eyes on him, I was sent to him actually for some problems ... and I just remember clamming up straight away, I just didn't trust him with anything.

Toni felt that the confidentiality issue was exacerbated for her because she lived in a small rural community:

Toni: ... you just knew (confidentiality) wasn't there... even if I had talked to counsellors at school, I mean, they would have gone straight to (my mother).

She regarded the counsellors at her school as incompetent. In her mind they lacked listening skills, empathy and were unaware of issues that faced lesbian and gay students:

Toni: They were a joke ... they were completely useless at what they were supposed to do for one thing. They had no empathy, let alone sympathy or anything like that. No understanding of anything unless it was violence from another student. There was just no way that you could talk to them about it.

Rachel felt that guidance counsellors, were uninformed about lesbian and gay issues, and needed to examine their own homophobic attitudes
in order to cater to the needs of lesbian and gay students more fully. However she also recognised that many of these entrenched attitudes were changing:

Rachel: No, I don't think they even know how to deal with it themselves as in 'How do I accept these people?'... It is changing...

Vita went once to the counsellor and didn't return. She felt that the counsellor offered no positive suggestions to deal with her situation:

Vita: ... it was just 'Well you have talked about it your half hour or whatever is up, and just go out there and if you feel that you have got to talk again then you can come back.' There was like no remedy or anything ... I didn't get anything out of that at all.

A lack of female counsellors in the school Toni attended, meant that she saw no point in contacting either of the two male counsellors who worked there.

Positive Experiences With Guidance Counsellors

The participants who had positive experiences with guidance counsellors identified a number of characteristics which made them feel comfortable. Jackie was impressed by her counsellor's listening skills, concern, non judgemental attitude, use of positive suggestions to ease the situation and the way she was able to affirm her feelings:
Jackie: She was really really good, she just sat and listened really, (she) didn't say anything, like I'm disappointed or anything, she just was a really nice person, she was really cool and said you might want to talk to (the gay teacher), or something like that which was really cool. She didn't want to ask questions or anything ... she just wasn't in to that, she just wanted me to tell how I was feeling and just had that sort of right to feel it, which was good.

Melissa found out after she had left, that the school guidance counsellor was dealing with other students who thought that they may be lesbian. She felt annoyed at her assumption that she was the only lesbian in the school:

Melissa: ... it wasn't until after I'd left and I was talking to her on a professional level that I found out that other students had gone to her and said that they were lesbian, she said that it had cropped up and I thought Jesus, I never knew! ... I guess I assumed I was the only one who might be wondering, apparently that happens in her work quite regularly.
CHAPTER 6: PEERS

Isobel: There was absolutely no evidence of anybody being different. It was just everybody playing this courtship game and it was like living in this social world that I just didn’t understand or relate to.

Melissa: I thought I was the only one.

Moore and Rosenthal (1993) point out the important role that peers play in formulating adolescent beliefs and regulating their behaviour. They go on to say that peer group acceptance and 'fitting in' are important in adolescents' maintenance of self esteem and the movement towards maturity. One of the key areas that this transition occurs in is sexuality. Adolescents move from a reliance on the family, to an increasing reliance on peers to provide guidelines for attitudes and behaviours. Therefore peer attitudes towards sexuality can often affect teenagers deeply. Because of the silence and the negative attitudes that surround lesbian issues and the pervasiveness of heterosexual values in society, lesbian and gay students have particular difficulty relating to their peers as they often have little in common with their heterosexual friends. As a result they can often become isolated and distant from them (Sears, 1991; Stapp, 1992; Trenchard and Warren, 1984).

All of the participants in this study felt excluded from the heterosexual concerns of their peers and this exclusion led to feelings of isolation. Toni and Lisa simply withdrew from their friends in order not to have to deal with their homophobic attitudes. Others like Isobel and Rachel
turned to more mature and liberal adults, including teachers, for friendship.

Some students chose to take the step of disclosing their sexuality to peers. In the case of Alice, this was not a problem because she had tolerant friends but others like Belinda and Toni lost friendships and were often the object of derision.

The silence that surrounded lesbian issues made some interviewees feel as if it was something immoral and unacceptable. This prevented the majority of them from talking about their emerging lesbian feelings:

Toni: It was a silent subject ... it automatically sprung to mind that it was the wrong thing, you know, because it is not talked about so therefore it can't be right.

Cathy: I could feel was that it was something negative... Yeah, it was really on the outside... it was so negative that you just didn't want to talk about it.... I got the impression that they thought it wasn't okay.

For Isobel, these feelings meant that she felt unable to relate to her peers and that she lead a solitary life:

Isobel: There's this innate knowledge in you from a really early age that it's wrong and inappropriate and abnormal. It puts this other social handicap on you because every time you confront the world with that knowledge you have to hide behind so many things.
Because three of the participants felt isolated and alienated from peers they often developed friendships with teachers:

Isobel: ...I developed strong friendships with a few of my teachers and I spent as much time with them as I possibly could and as little time with my peer group.

Vita: ... I was so aware of all these other teachers, I definitely definitely wanted to always be in their attention.

Toni: It was actually quite (something) to talk to somebody other than (my teacher), like one of my friends

Isobel: There was no sexuality education. You need freedom to express and explore sexuality as an integral part of your personal development.

Seven of the young women chose not to disclose their lesbian identities to some people. Toni felt that if she told her peers, her physical safety would be in jeopardy:

Toni: ... well basically it was because I didn't want to get beaten up.

Belinda envisaged that she would be on the receiving end of verbal abuse:

Belinda: I'd probably get lots of names called out to me ... that's probably what would happen anyway.
The homophobic reactions of Belinda's close friend reveal the extent to which she felt that being lesbian is unacceptable for most people. She felt silenced by her friend's reaction:

Belinda: ... even that friend of mine in the 4th form who I've told, who I'm really close to and stuff ... if I say anything out loud she gets a bit uncomfortable, like she gets really scared and she's like 'Oh no, what if someone hears?'... I don't usually say something I just usually shut up.

She was careful exactly how much she disclosed in order to protect herself:

Belinda: ... if I feel like I have to say something I do but nothing too obvious, to give away my sexual identity .... there's some people who I wouldn't tell and some people I would, really (it) depends on the person.

If Rachel was ever confronted with someone asking her about it she would deny that she was a lesbian:

Rachel: ... I would pretend that I was straight.

Jackie expressed discomfort and exclusion at her lack of honesty with her friends:

Jackie: it just seems to me to be lying, I don't like not telling the truth ... you can't talk about a relationship whereas everyone else can talk about who they are seeing, you
know, what's going on in their lives, and I would like to
be able to do that.

Silence wasn't perceived by all the interviewees as a negative state. Rachel felt that her silence about being a lesbian protected her and made her feel less vulnerable to the negative reactions of others:

Rachel: It (my silence) actually made me feel safe because to me it's a very personal part of my life and I don't see the need for other people to know... its just part of me that I don't want to share. I guess it would come down to the fact that I'd probably be exposed.

The importance of peers to adolescents is highlighted by Rosenthal (1993). Because heterosexuality is regarded as the norm and anything that occurs outside its parameters is perceived as an aberration, often the young women felt excluded and this made them feel isolated.

Jackie perceived a huge gap between her and her friends and did everything possible to minimise it:

Jackie: I still wanted to at that age at least have some semblance of fitting in to what everyone was doing ... I was just trying to just push it aside. Because it ... seemed to me a very major obstacle ... between me and my friends.

Isobel, Lisa and Belinda felt as if they had little in common with their heterosexual friends:
Isobel: ... I didn't relate at all to all the boyfriend-girlfriend stuff that was going on.... when you walk into (other girls') rooms ... and they've got all these posters of gorgeous young men out of Dolly magazines, just wall to wall of male flesh and the idolisation of Duran Duran and whatever rock group was going on at the time, I just couldn't relate to that at all.

Lisa: ... I never had any interest in going out with boys. I couldn't understand what all the fuss was about. The others were talking about them and parties and what they were up to ... I knew inside that I was different and that I was attracted to women.

Jackie felt excluded from social events because of their exclusively heterosexual focus:

Jackie: You would go to a party and you are not likely to meet anyone that you are attracted to at a party because we were going to straight parties with straight friends, yeah, pretty much everyone was straight ... it wasn't a pleasant thought to be a person sitting on the sofa tapping their feet in time to the music.

Isobel avoided socialising because she felt as if she had little in common with her peers:

Isobel: I was isolated from the social things that were going on at school. I never ever went to a school social or a
school dance because I just didn’t have any interest, I didn’t feel like I related to any of those people.

Belinda perceived that the huge pressure to be heterosexual meant that a previously bisexual friend went straight. Belinda found her friend’s rejection of her difficult to deal with:

Belinda: ... she feels uncomfortable whenever homosexuality is mentioned particularly by me ... she wanted to be normal. All her friends were heterosexual and she wanted to fit in, she couldn’t cope with a homosexual lifestyle... I felt really irritated by it and she shut me out completely and I still think she still feels confused about her sexuality.

These feelings of exclusion increased five of the young women’s feelings of isolation. Melissa felt different and isolated from her friends because she thought she was the only lesbian:

Melissa: When I first came out because none of my peer group identified as lesbian ... I did feel really different from them, isolated...That was kind of a big something that I couldn’t just talk to anybody about.

Vita: (lesbianism) just was never discussed at all. Um, I don’t think that they (my peers) were brought up in families where it was an issue so they basically never thought of it and certainly all of them were pretty staunch catholics ... and it just wasn’t discussed.
These feelings of isolation were difficult to deal with during adolescence, when there is such a pressure to conform to peers’ expectations. As a result most of the interviewees chose not to tell any of their friends that they were lesbians. Melissa, Rachel, Toni and Lisa felt that they could not deal with the inevitable rejection they thought they would have to face if their friends found out they were lesbians:

Lisa: I didn’t feel part of their group sort of things. I knew that I was different ... I felt left out. I guess I was afraid of rejection, of being hurt by what they might say. Afraid of being totally alienated.

Rachel: I guess that I don’t think that my personality is strong enough to hold me up in case I got rejected. Rejection is a big issue with me.

Melissa: I couldn’t have come out to my peer group, possibly their reaction would have been the most damaging because they’re my age group ... I don’t think I would have dealt with it very well if they had rejected me, so I didn’t tell them.

The sense of isolation for Belinda was increased by peers speaking behind her back, rather than addressing her directly:

Belinda: Umm, well there’s some rumours going around (about me), they’re not actually sure but they like to think I am
(a lesbian), I don't know for sure really, they don't really tell me anything.

She felt vulnerable inviting casual friends home and chose not to be open about her lesbian identity with them:

Belinda: They (my friends) are a bit funny when they come here, with other people. I don't really invite people around unless they're really good friends ... With some of my friends I would take my posters down.

Cathy felt that she was unable to form close friendships with her peers because she was unable to be honest with them about her sexuality:

Cathy: ... it always made me think ... that my friendship with even my close friends was quite superficial because although they might bear their souls to me, or appear to, ... about their relationships and all that kind of stuff, I was always just talking at a very kind of like shallow kind of level to them... and so consequently I think it affected how close I got to my friends.

Jackie and Cathy delayed telling their friends until they were on the verge of leaving school or had left school altogether:

Cathy: ... but it wasn't until 7th form that I started telling my close friends about my sexuality and even then I didn't tell that many people until after I left school.
Close friends provided important support for Jackie and because of this she didn't come out until the end of that year:

Jackie: I didn't do anything until later on in the 7th form because by then I had such a really really close tight group of friends ... it was kind of comfortable and safe.

Four of the students did decide to come out to their friends. They were often very selective over who they chose to reveal this information to:

Belinda: I'd like to tell everybody but I know its not really possible, I don't care what people think if I'm open about it but I mean if the whole school knew, I don't know how I'd feel.

When Jackie attempted to tell her friends, they just assumed she was talking about a male. This reveals the pervasiveness of the heterosexual culture amongst adolescents:

Jackie: ... I told my friends that I had met a really interesting person and they all thought that it was a man and then I said 'Oh no it was a woman.' and that's how I came out to a couple of friends.

Belinda was shocked and hurt at her close friend's assumption that Belinda would make sexual advances towards her just because she told her she was a lesbian:
Belinda: People really change towards you once you tell them. Vasha, I told her I was a lesbian and she said "Don't come on to me." I was shocked. I didn't think that she'd say something like that...

Toni thought that many of her peers were afraid that they may be lesbian or gay themselves:

Toni: ... they (peers) were scared because they thought the same, they thought they were (gay or lesbian), ... you could see it written all over their face.

Cathy and Belinda felt tremendously relieved when they did tell their friends. They both felt less isolated and better about themselves as lesbians:

Cathy: I felt like I was telling them for the first time who I was and what I was and ... so actually letting my school friends in on my secret life cleared a lot of things up for them and got easier for me.

Belinda: Yeah, I told one girl who was quite a good friend of mine and she took it really really well, I think she might be a lesbian ... she's not uncomfortable around me and ... it feels really good, I know someone who's actually on my side and supports me, so I can talk to her about it.

Looking back, Vita regrets not confiding in a friend who she now knows is a lesbian. She recognises in hindsight, how much easier and more
supportive her experience of coming to terms with herself as a lesbian could have been if she had been able to be more open with her peers:

Vita: ... I would go into the other workroom to talk to my friend who I now know is lesbian and like we never knew and we used to have quite profound conversations. If only we had been honest to ourselves then maybe the process for both of us would have been a lot easier... To think it was there... and we missed out on what could have been really good support to each other.

Harassment

Verbal and physical harassment of lesbian and gay students has been a feature of previous research findings (Quinlivan, 1992, Sears, 1991, Trenchard and Warren, 1984). Alton-Lee (1993) also revealed that derogatory references to gay males were commonly used as verbal insults in the playground and the classroom. Often these comments were used as a general putdown and seldom referred to the literal meaning of the word. Rachel identified the same sort of behaviour in the secondary school that she attended:

Rachel: Basically if you did something stupid everybody would call you a faggot. So it was like a demeaning thing, that's basically how I got the negative impression. Or if you put your arm around your mate or something you'd get "What are ya you gay twit?" or something like that. It was made out to be an abusive thing.
Teachers also received this verbal harassment from students:

Rachel: ... any teacher that you hate you called them a fag, it was like the first thing that you thought of, even if they were married.

Verbal harassment was experienced by several interviewees. In Toni's case it took the form of a general insult:

Toni: Well sort of, they were just being revolting, they were just being bastards, actually ... somebody said, Oh you stupid lesbian.

One of Belinda's friends colluded with peers telling jokes about lesbians and gays. She found this painful and insulting:

Belinda: If people make jokes about gays or lesbians, she sort of laughs about it... I feel quite hurt, it does affect me.

Two examples of harassment focussed on the threat of discovery. Being identified as a lesbian was regarded as so distasteful that it was an insult. One student was keen to find out if Belinda was a lesbian and relentlessly pursued her to get an answer:

Belinda: She just said to me 'Are you a lesbian?' and I just ... keep saying 'It's none of your business' and then in the end she stops asking, but then sometimes she just brings it up again and it starts over again.
Melissa received written abuse on a poster that she had repeatedly displayed:

Melissa: I put up a Women's Centre newsletter. It had something about 4 lesbian women on it and it got ripped down and I put it up again and it got scribbled on and somebody had written on it 'Cartland's a lessie'.

Harassment had made Belinda feel vulnerable and alienated from her peers:

Belinda: They criticise people who are gay or lesbian, (using) lessie and just put downs really, which is quite irritating.

While verbal abuse was experienced by some of the young women I interviewed, none of them thought they had experienced physical abuse because they were known to be lesbians. Toni suggested that gay students would be far more at risk of being beaten up if they were overt about their sexuality:

Toni: Basically, it would have been too dangerous for them (gay men) to open up.

Six of the interviewees knew of lesbian and gay teachers being harassed because of their sexuality. This increased the students' feelings that there was something wrong with being a lesbian. Toni and Belinda described situations where students had scrawled insulting messages on the blackboard of a teacher who was known to be a lesbian. Toni felt
that the open way in which the harassment was dealt with by the teacher meant that students never mentioned it again:

Toni: ... (the students) actually wrote it up on the blackboard, something about lesbian slut and she just stood there and said, 'I am the local officer for ... women's rights groups and things like that and I only have one partner, and we have been together for years, okay?, she is really wonderful and I want to keep it that way, and I am not sleeping with anybody else.' and ... it just never came up in conversation again.

Graffiti written on a classroom blackboard concerning her, another lesbian student and a lesbian teacher at Belinda's school made her feel angry, but she could also see the humorous side to it:

Belinda: A lesbian teacher at school found some graffiti on a board in her classroom which stated that she and I were in a relationship and that another lesbian student was jealous of this relationship. I was actually quite angry, people have no right to do this, it's just not appropriate really but I could also see a funny side to this, it didn't have that big an effect on me.

She thought that underlying the graffiti was the common myth that lesbians have uncontrollable sexual urges and can't keep their hands off each other:
Belinda: They assumed that because there are a lesbian teacher and a student at the school that it automatically means that they are in a relationship.

Jackie's teacher was openly gay and this was regarded by students as laughable:

Jackie: ... gay teachers at school were always a big joke ... people that didn't know him, and had no idea, no contact with him, just saw it as a joke, like snigger, snigger, there is a man who is gay. For some reason, that is particularly hilarious ...

Both teachers were the object of overt verbal harassment. Vita's teacher had to move to another school:

Vita: For a year we had a R. E (Religious Education) teacher, the first man R. E teacher we had ever had ... and the girls literally tore him to shreds and he moved on to another school.

Students in Jackie's class would verbally harass the gay teacher in order to see just how far he could be pushed before he reacted:

Jackie: ...there were guys who would just like testing the waters, just trying ... to stretch him I think ... these guys were really giving him arseholes if they possibly could.
Jackie remembered that during the Homosexual Law Reform debates of 1986 there were a lot of negative reactions to lesbians and gays from her peers. This made her feel vulnerable and unsafe:

Jackie: No, it didn't ... safe... definitely wasn't comfortable ... I remember in Brian's class...when people are anti something, they are much more vocal, and much more vehement about it, like the Reform Bill... so you would hear much more that ... gays are sick... it was really negative.

Jackie admired the way he dealt with the harassment openly and was able to defuse the situation:

Jackie: I really admired him the way he handled it... he just used to play along with them, you know, they would go, oh Brian, or Mr Harper, ( and suggest) something like meeting him afterwards for drinks or something ... and he would just go, 'Yes, that would be lovely.' And just play along with them. I think all they were doing was trying to make him feel embarrassed and he wasn't going to be embarrassed so they sort of lost the edge really. It was just me that was embarrassed.

However she also felt vulnerable thinking that her peers could expose her as well and she would also be harassed:

Jackie: (It was) kind of internalised homophobia, like I was thinking like I know am, and I am doing my best not to
tell anybody, certainly not in those classrooms, jesus....I honestly thought that at any time they were going to somehow find about me and I don't know if they were going to pick on me or something, give me a hard time, I'm not quite sure.
CHAPTER 7: SEXUALITY AND LOVE: BEING A LESBIAN ADOLESCENT

Isobel: There was ... just this really intense need to be around this person all the time and to have her company and just these heart stopping emotions that would happen to me.

The young lesbian women in this study identified two main areas of 'love' attraction for them, their peers and their teachers. The participants' attractions to peers were problematic. The two young women who felt these attractions most strongly were aware of how unacceptable this was to their friends. Rather than deal with those friends' feelings about homosexuality they chose to discontinue the friendship and withdraw from them. This withdrawal increased the participants' feelings of isolation.

The major romantic focus for seven of the young women were their teachers. This reinforces previous research findings (Sears, 1991; Stapp, 1992; Trenchard and Warren, 1984). Both heterosexual and lesbian women were the focus of these attractions. Teacher crushes are also experienced by young heterosexual women. Perhaps though, taking into consideration the silence and invisibility that surrounds lesbianism, there is more of a desperate need for young lesbian women to seek mirrored images of their emerging feelings in others (Riddle, 1978). As both strong independent women and as lesbians, the interviewees perceived that these older women served as important role models for them.
Rachel, Cathy, Belinda and Toni felt that these attractions had a strong sexual component, while Isobel believed that her feelings were complicated by her lack of information and awareness about lesbians. Melissa, Alice and Lisa perceived that they worshipped their teachers from afar. Rachel, Cathy, Belinda and Toni openly confessed their feelings for teachers. None of the crushes developed beyond that stage. Cathy however, had a short relationship with a teacher at her school. While it was exciting to begin with, she felt that the power dynamics became destructive for her and she ended the relationship herself.

A feminist teacher served as an important role model for Melissa. She was content to admire her from a distance rather than approach her and tell her about her feelings:

Melissa: ... Well the one that I fell in love with was definitely worship from afar ... the reason that I joined the Women's Centre was to see her out of school ... I just admired her I guess.

Several of the young women felt that their emerging lesbian identity placed them on the outside of their peer group. This meant that they often grew up very quickly and felt more comfortable interacting with adults than with their peers:

Rachel: I also think that my sexuality has made me want to feel more mature, to get a better understanding ... I've always felt older than what I am.
Students' crushes on lesbian teachers cause lesbian educators difficulties and stress. Aware that many of their colleagues still accepted the belief that lesbians were predatory paedophiliacs, they believed that the situation placed their credibility as professionals and their careers at risk (Khayatt, 1992; Stapp, 1991). However the lesbian teachers known to the participants were important to them.

Many of the interviewees identified their teachers as lesbians very quickly:

Belinda: She was my Social studies teacher and I thought she was a dyke straight away when I first saw her and when I came out as a lesbian the crush got bigger.

Rachel was drawn to older women as a way to find out about the lesbian community:

Rachel: It was about 7th form when I started getting curious about what happened in the gay community and so I was trying to find out different bits and pieces.

Belinda did talk to her teacher about her feelings and received the message that the attraction was not reciprocated:

Belinda: She was strong, easy to get along with, intelligent ... I've realised that it's not really possible, that my relationship with Suzanne is a friendship, nothing more.
It was only in retrospect that Isobel realised the extent to which she was actively seeking older lesbians as role models at school:

Isobel: It’s funny how you seek out (adults to mirror you). I wasn’t aware that all this was going on at the time, but looking back I’m aware that that was going on in my head and my heart.

She perceives that this was due to the fact that such a silence surrounded the existence of lesbians in schools:

Isobel: ...I was completely unaware of this notion of lesbianism. I didn't know what was going on.

Rachel acknowledged that the attractions she felt for teachers got in the way of her academic success at school. It was not until she dealt with the pressing issue of her own sexual identity that she could put her mind to other aspects of her life:

Rachel: They were a pain in the ass. They put me off my school studies ... it was a big distraction and I couldn't stop the way I was feeling.

Vita didn’t realise until after she left her first school how overt her actions towards teachers she admired were:

Vita: These incredible infatuations were, I mean I was aware of them, but I didn’t think anyone else was and ... the latest friend I’ve told (that I am a lesbian) she said, ‘Oh that
explains so much.' and .... I thought that they were fairly covered up.

Relationships with teachers

One interviewee had a two month relationship with a teacher at the same school. In the beginning Cathy felt that this was both exciting and flattering for her:

Cathy: ... In a way it was almost like the storybook, living out one of those fantasies ... it was all very romantic ... I found her incredibly attractive and very knowledgable and athletic and grownup.

She thought that the relationship was isolated and secretive because they seldom went out socially and the relationship was kept a secret:

Cathy: We never actually went out socially, oh we did actually a couple of times but not anywhere where we would be seen... apart from her very close friends our relationship was virtually unknown of...

Cathy also felt that the teacher failed to acknowledge the age difference between them and she perceived herself as excluded from the older woman's friendship circle:

Cathy: ... just meeting her older friends and not feeling sort of part of that and she never introduced me as anything
other than her partner, she never sort of said "Oh this is a student at my school"

Cathy thought that one of the reasons for this silence was that the consequences of someone finding out about the relationship could have been that the teacher lost her job. This knowledge made Cathy feel as if she was somehow at fault:

Cathy: ... I realised that if I'd spoken about this teacher then it possibly would have got her into a lot of trouble and um so I felt very much as though I'd done something wrong at that stage... Just because I couldn't speak about it.

Cathy also realised that because she was a minor, they were also committing a criminal offence and thought that this was another reason to keep the relationship a secret:

Cathy: ...I mean I realise now that what she did was illegal ... but yeah the fact (was) that I didn't want to tell on her and that she didn't want to be told on ... It was just easier keeping it fairly hush hush.

The secrecy and lack of acknowledgement of the relationship made Cathy feel insecure and powerless:

Cathy: ...I've never felt intellectually subordinate to anyone else or very seldom find myself in that kind of role ... and with this teacher it was like that. Like she very much had it together and she knew where she was going in the
relationship ... I was very much the ... student in the relationship.

Cathy acknowledged that these feelings lead her to the point of contemplating suicide:

Cathy: ...I felt very messed up... (I got out) basically before I slit my wrists. It felt like at the time it was coming to that stage.

She decided to end the relationship at that point and looking back now realises now how vulnerable she felt then:

Cathy: I mean, seriously thinking about suicide just because you know you’re going out with a woman who you know you’re being messed around by!

She later realised some of the power she could have used to destroy the teacher’s career but chose not to use the information she had:

Cathy: ... I came back to school with a lot of hickeys and I felt extremely tired ... and everyone in the class was joking about it and going, ‘Who’s your boyfriend, who’s your boyfriend?’ and this teacher ... was looking at me and she had this extremely sort of worried look on her face at the time ... and I just sort of thought, well good.

Looking back, Cathy now questions the power that the teacher had in the relationship and recognised that it was abusive:
Cathy: ... I s'pose you can't help who you fall in love with but ... using your authority in that relationship, I think that's wrong.

Attractions to friends

Cathy's unreciprocated attraction towards a friend placed stresses on the friendship that were too great to overcome for Cathy. She decided to withdraw from the friendship rather than deal with her friend's feelings:

Cathy: ... I pretty quickly disengaged myself from that friendship because ... I knew that I wouldn't ever take it any further than that ever. I found it really stressful just being in a friendship with her.
CHAPTER 8: CREATING LESBIAN IDENTITIES

Toni: I got very secluded basically... (l)... cut myself off from quite
  a few people, like everyone you know, I got very
  withdrawn, because I wasn't being honest with everybody
  and myself really.

Belinda: Since I've come out I've been much more confident. I've come
  across something really exciting in my life that makes me
  feel really good and really proud.

This chapter deals with the complex issue of sexual identity and what it
meant to the ten young lesbians in this study. As Sears (1991) points
out, while some of young lesbians and gay men in his study were keen
to embrace the labels of lesbian and gay, others preferred to avoid the
labels as inadequate attempts to define themselves which gave no room
for change and growth. In the same way, the young women who
participated in this study are not a homogeneous group. They reflected
differing perceptions about what they consider their lesbian identities
to mean to them as individuals.

All of the participants were at different stages in the development of
their identities as lesbians during the time that they were at school and
also at the time they were interviewed. While they were at school, the
extent to which they were willing to reveal themselves as lesbians
differed depending on what context they were in. For four of them, it
consisted of a continuation of the silence that they experienced at
school. The silence resulted in them hiding their lesbian identities
which had damaging repercussions. The other six actively sought
lesbian communities and the different support systems they offered for young lesbians. Those participants who accessed these support systems were better placed to create positive images of themselves as young lesbian women.

First lesbian feelings

Whether homosexuality is 'caused' through biology or socialisation has been a matter of great debate over recent years. Arguing that social construction plays a larger part in constructing lesbian and gay (as well as heterosexual) identity, Sears (1991) critiques the persistent attempts made by some researchers to provide a biological explanation for homosexuality. Because these studies have only been carried out on limited samples of human subjects they are open to interpretation. Furthermore, they have focused exclusively on sexual behaviour and failed to take into account issues of identity, homosexual feelings and desires. Both Sears and Goggin (1993) cited the studies of Money and Ehrhardt (1972), who concluded that core gender and sex role identities were formed by the age of three, and that the origins of bisexuality, heterosexuality and homosexuality are determined primarily during late infancy and early childhood, when gender differentiation is being established. When discussing both the biological and psycho-social theories advanced to explain what causes lesbianism and gayness, Goggin noted that research involving lesbians in this area is almost completely absent.

Rachel, Toni and Isobel felt that being a lesbian had been a part of them for as long as they could remember:
Rachel: No, its always been like a natural part of me, it wasn't like 'holy shit' it's just me, its always been there.

Toni: I've always looked at women, never looked at men.

Isobel: ...have always strongly identified with women, from a young age I've formed strong relationships with women and been aware that I don't connect in the same way with men.

Vita recognised the role that socialisation played in formulating her sexual identity. She perceived that living in an overwhelmingly heterosexual culture meant that being a lesbian was never presented as a viable alternative to her:

Vita: I was definitely born this way ... there was such a silence I didn't know it existed ... but then when I began to realise that oh hang on, now why are they all looking at the guys and I'm not and again pieces began to fit into place.

It was in early adolescence that Rachel began to think they may be lesbian:

Rachel: I was pretty sure that I was a lesbian myself since the third form.

Alice connected this realisation with the fact that she found herself feeling attracted to women:
Alice: I think the first real sign would have been when I was about twelve I suppose. I've always thought that women were very beautiful, much nicer than men.

Jackie felt that falling in love with another young woman was the catalyst which forced her to confront the possibility that she may be a lesbian:

Jackie: ... there was this woman my age at school that I was really really in love with, and I thought oh god, oh, there's no hiding it now, you just (have to) face it.'

Labels

Labels were problematic for Isobel, Jackie and Rachel. Isobel saw no necessity to identify herself by her sexuality at all, whereas Alice and Belinda liked the security that the word 'lesbian', as a label provided for them.

Alice felt that the diverse range of lesbians as role models she had when she was coming out meant she does not categorise lesbians as one homogeneous group:

Alice: I think I was lucky that while I was coming out I had a few lesbians around me, like at school, old and young, closeted, butch, femme, so I was never really confronted with one particular image of what a lesbian is.
Vita thought that she found it easier to describe herself as gay because the word had more positive connotations than if she described herself as a lesbian:

Vita: Well even now the word lesbian is very harsh as I find it and especially when talking to ... straight people, it is a lot easier for me to say gay because ... I feel that it's more acceptable to say gay than it is to say lesbian.

Sears (1991) noted the important counterweight to heterosexuality that feminism provided for one of the lesbians he interviewed. A feminist perspective underlay the perceptions that Jackie, Belinda Melissa and Toni had of themselves as young lesbians. Aware of the discrimination that they faced because of their gender and the ways in which women are constructed within the patriarchal system, they felt as if they had more in common with other women than with gay men.

Melissa felt that her involvement in feminism provided a safe place for her to explore the option that she may be a lesbian:

Melissa: I think that sub-consciously that was my stepping stone. I didn’t realise it at the time but that was the way forward for me to come out in a safe environment.

However, Vita strongly rejected the feminist label and pointed out that many younger lesbians feel that way too:
Vita: There is a really different thing coming through... it is like a whole new generation of lesbians growing up who feel really strongly (that they are not feminist).

Isobel saw attempts by others to categorise her sexuality as simplistic and limited:

Isobel: ... I think well why do I have to give this word to somebody else to identify me with ... I really can't cope with (labels) at all .... I don't like having to put one word to describe something that to me is so multi-faceted and complicated and mutable anyway.

Three of the young women saw distinct differences between themselves and older lesbian women. Jackie recognised that young lesbians today are not faced with the extreme homophobia that older lesbians had to deal with:

Jackie: ...90's people who are teenagers... have grown up ... (lesbians are) relatively better off than they were fifty or sixty years ago and there is not quite that desperate struggle there seemed to be to make amends with things.

Vita perceived that many younger lesbians are less judgemental about men than older lesbians are:

Vita: I think there is a complete new breed of young lesbians that seem to be coming out who are quite happy to be
just as nice to men as they are to women .... and not have this real hang up.

Jackie and Melissa thought that many young lesbians have a desire to break away from the stereotypical notion of women wanting more emotional than sexual fulfilment:

Jackie: ... I sense an attitude of ... wanting something ... not quite a quick blow job in the the toilet but something as freeing, (getting away from) the emotional commitment that they are supposed to have because they are women.

She recognises that one reason for women not to be seen as sexually independent in the past is because female sexuality has predominantly been defined in male terms:

Jackie: Well, because traditionally women aren't supposed to be into sex anyway ... if it's two women, then obviously they are not having sex anyway because they are women.

Cathy felt that the lines between lesbianism and bisexuality for her were becoming more blurred. For Cathy this situation provided much more of a choice than in the past when she felt that you either had to be gay or straight with no alternative in between:

Cathy: At the moment I'm thinking quite seriously about bisexuality ... I'm thinking, oh god if they can say they are and they haven't slept with any men and I've slept
with men and I'm staunchly sticking to being a lesbian then it's just the word then that people are using differently rather than the actual meaning behind it.

Lesbians and gay men

Traditional research on homosexuality has combined the experiences of lesbians and gay men, taking little account of their differences. Recent studies have deconstructed the role that gender plays in understanding notions of identity, in an attempt to provide a context for the experiences of young lesbians (Khayatt, 1994. Sears, 1991, Stapp, 1992).

Two of the participants felt that lesbians and gay men had more in common than they had differences. Belinda and Vita thought that both groups were marginalised in society:

Belinda: ... both lesbians and gays (are) having to deal with the same similar things having to do with our rights and our sanity and normality.

Vita perceived few differences between lesbians and gay men, preferring to see them both as people:

Vita: ... it's just never been an issue, I don't compare. I just think that's what you are into and that's what I am into and that's where any difference stops... I just regard people as people ... and we have all faced bias and oppression, neither group is more important than the other.
Four of the interviewees perceived themselves to be very different from gay men. Jackie felt that lesbian women were more oppressed than gay men because of their gender, which made them invisible:

Jackie: They're still ... basically white men, so they have got more opportunities ... they are men in a man's society and white in a white society ... women are less talked about and lesbians are a minority of that anyway so it's a double minority, so ... in schools, in books, etc you are very hard pushed especially with what's available at high school, to find out anything about lesbians.

Belinda felt that lesbians were more invisible than gay men because they held less power in society:

Belinda: Gays and lesbians are similar in some ways but are also very different. It's harder for gay men to come out than lesbians because lesbians aren't seen as real.

She went on to point out that male homosexuals are more of a threat because they have more power in society than women do:

Belinda: It was illegal to be homosexual but there were no laws for lesbians. Because they are women, and women aren't as highly thought of as men. Men who have relationships with other men are thought of more highly than women who have relationships with women. They are betraying the role of men as the strong head of the household.
Toni disagreed with this perspective and believed that lesbians are more of a threat to patriarchal power because they exist outside its heterosexual norms:

Toni: Women who have relationships with women are more dangerous because they live and survive without men and so are in a better position to see the oppression of women.

She maintains that this is why lesbian have been pathologised and marginalised by male discourses:

Toni: This is why we must be kept in the closet out of sight, so that women can not see their own strength. Male homosexuals are not so much of a threat because they are males and tie themselves to males.

Toni thought that gay males at her school were the subject of more overt physical harassment than lesbians because their behaviour threatened the male power base. Women were perceived as less important and therefore posed less of a threat:

Toni: ... they were treated harsher because there were these two guys who were caught in the changing sheds ... the school didn't do anything but the school bully did, they were just completely shown up and slightly beat up ... girls were caught too but nothing ever happened to them.
Cathy perceived that one of the differences between lesbians and gay men is that women's sexual relationships are less fraught with power issues than gay males are likely to be:

Cathy: I think a lot of the issues are different for men... I think that in gay relationships it's a lot more of a power thing than in lesbian relationships to do with sex.

Four of the participants felt that acknowledging their lesbianism had been an important part of their personal development. Coleman (1982) refers to this stage as identity integration, when the individual accepts their identity and is able to integrate it into their lives.

Belinda and Vita perceived that having a label of lesbian has provided them with an explanation of their feelings and made them feel more positive and accepting of themselves:

Vita: I have an identity which I think I was struggling to find before and I feel a wee bit more of a whole person ... (there's been) a huge change from denial and confusion to acceptance and fitting into a 'niche'.

Alice felt that being able to identify as a lesbian was an important step in coming to understand herself:

Alice: ...that was a real hassle for me, just not ... being able to identify with anything, I hated that.
Cathy felt that the search for her lesbian identity has resulted in her gaining an inner strength because she has had to examine feelings which, she felt, heterosexuals never had to:

Cathy: I actually feel (being a lesbian has) made me a lot stronger because I've been questioning who I am and what I am for the last five years and ... when you're questioning like that it ... makes you ... more sure of who you are and a lot of heterosexuals never have to question that.

Cathy recognised the need for many young lesbians and gay men to have an identity results in extreme and sometimes stereotyped appearance and behaviour:

Cathy: ... I think at any stage when you come out ... you usually go to the extreme just to show yourself who you are and to sort of show other people who you are. Like I know a lot of people get their hair cut or get a tattoo or ... act very butch for a while.

She felt that the need for lesbians to identify themselves so radically often changed as people got more accustomed to themselves as lesbian or gay and felt less of a need to conform to others, and their own expectations:

Cathy: ... you can sort of settle back into the role that you feel comfortable rather than the role you see gays and lesbians as they should be.
Support

A lesbian and gay youth group played an important role in affirming Jackie's lesbian feelings. She felt that the group played an important role in providing information and making her feel more comfortable with herself:

Jackie: It was really good going along there and getting all this kind of information that it is okay and you know you can just sort of become aware of everything.

Jackie thought that one of the most valuable features of the group was that it provided a forum where common issues were able to be raised:

Jackie: I think because ... everyone has gone through it, at their high schools and when you get together out of high school ... you don't have to say anything you just know the other person has gone through it and you know you are sort of talking about it and you just get on with living it.

Lesbian Icebreakers is a group that provides support for young women who think that they may be lesbian or bisexual. Two of the interviewees attended the group. Alice enjoyed the meetings and felt that they provided a good introduction to the lesbian community:

Alice: It was heaps of fun and it was a good way of making the initial contact.
Contact and friendships with other young lesbians have helped Cathy and Belinda consolidate their emerging lesbian identities:

Belinda: I've been able to meet lots of other lesbians and make friendships and that's been good. Without that support I really wouldn't be able to do anything. It would be really hard.

Cathy: .... I can probably thank my friends for that actually ... just realising that no great big bolt of lightning has come down out of the sky and nothing nasty has happened to me since.

A friendship with a very 'out' young gay male friends helped Vita to come to terms with her emerging lesbian feelings:

Vita: I am really really pleased that I knew him, especially at that time because he helped me a lot ... to discuss it and that kind of thing, if I hadn't of had that then probably I would be having real problems with things because he forced it in front of me and I couldn't hide from it.

The support of close women friends provided Isobel with an acceptance of who she was:

Isobel: I met people who... not only tolerated, but valued, loved and appreciated people who were strong enough to live
their own lifestyle and to be themselves... I've had lots of really strong women, most of them lesbian, around me.

However, Belinda felt that her youth excluded her from fully participating in lesbian communities:

Belinda: I hate being 14. I can't really do much, the people who I really want to have relationships with I can't. Especially when I want to go to places like dances where there's an age limit. I (wish)... people would take you seriously as an adult, not as a young 14 year old, who's just come out.

Cathy felt that the welcoming nature of lesbian and gay communities has made her feel more accepting of herself:

Cathy: I would have probably crawled back into my nice wee heterosexual exterior again, or at least outwardly, if I hadn't been made so welcome and made to feel good.

Alice plans to maintain her contact with the lesbian community by attending lesbian social events and venues:

Alice: I go to lesbian dances most of the time, when they are on and to clubs and I'll probably get involved with the street parade.

Reading has been an important way for Alice, Belinda and Isobel to increase their historical and contemporary knowledge of lesbianism and to affirm themselves:
Alice: (I read) about lesbians, like through the centuries. From Sappho through to Janis Joplin, that's really great.

Isobel: I had all these heroes and my first love affair with a literary idol was Collette. I loved Collette, its only recently that I've found out (she was a lesbian) ... I guess I owe a lot to them because in seeing them as really wonderful strong minds and imaginations and people I admired and adored ... I felt better about being me and how I felt... it was good.

Belinda: I have read the majority of lesbian coming out stories and enjoy the odd lesbian mystery.
Silenced Lives: The Difficulties

Sears (1991) has identified the lack of support available for young lesbians and gay men who grow up in a predominantly heterosexual society as being a significant factor in the difficulties they face. His findings reflect the experiences of the young women I interviewed. Coleman (1982) has also outlined the difficulties inherent in the stages people go through coming to terms with lesbian and gay identity, pointing out that aspects of ourselves can remain unresolved for many years.

All of the women in this study had experienced difficulties in coming to terms with being a lesbian to some extent. They felt their journey was made more difficult than it needed to be because in a predominantly heterosexual world lesbianism was and is often a subject shrouded in silence.

Vita thought that the silence that surrounded issues of lesbianism meant that she was unaware of what being a lesbian even was. Because there was no reflection of her own image for her anywhere, she felt confused and silenced herself:

Vita: I didn't know what was happening. I don't think I would have been able to have talked to anybody at all.

Because of the difficulty they experienced nearly all of the interviewees endeavoured to suppress their emerging lesbian feelings.
Jackie, Lisa and Isobel for example, thought that feelings of isolation lead to them suppressing their feelings:

Jackie: We were going out to straight places and totally straight things and... either had to do that or you had to do nothing, so it was just like suppressing things.

Lisa: Yeah, probably because I kept everything inside and I didn't really talk to anyone about I how I felt.

Isobel: If you look at the world that you inhabit when you're young you've got your school and perhaps your neighbourhood and your parents and your immediate family so if you feel lonely and isolated from that then it's harder to seek support outside of those areas and that's when everything gets so internalised.

Jackie felt that she paid a huge personal price for denying her lesbian feelings by covering up how she felt:

Jackie: ... the fact that I just couldn't, didn't feel like I could say yes, this is who I am, it was... kept in, not being able to say, I just kept on sort of smiling.

Lisa also perceived that keeping her lesbianism a secret took its personal toll:

Lisa: I just couldn't talk about how I felt then. That's probably why I avoided dealing with how I felt. At the time I
probably thought it's okay to keep everything inside but looking back it wasn't, 'cos that probably held me back from growing and maturing into an adult.

Toni and Vita found out that their feelings didn't go away just because they refused to acknowledge them:

Toni: I didn't (deal with my feelings). Just put them into this room, shut the door for a while, but the door would always open again by itself.

Vita: ... I thought I don't understand what's happening and again I couldn't put a label on it so I would just push it to the back again so it was always there.

As a result of not receiving any recognition and of suppressing their emerging lesbian feelings, four of the young women felt isolated and alone. Isobel for example, felt that she began to cut herself off from everybody around her:

Isobel: Separation comes between you and the rest of the world and the way you feel and the way you express things... I couldn't function effectively in a school environment. I felt totally separated from myself and couldn't get in touch with how felt about myself. I could not learn inside of it. I felt separated from the whole way that world functioned. There was no place for me
Toni thought that in order to cope, she could cut herself off from her problems by not acknowledging her feelings:

Toni: I went through school on automatic, and just sort of did the things I did by routine, just like I had to get up, had to go to classes, had to sit something, had to go out to break, you know, I was just oblivious to pretty much everything.

Fear of others finding out prevented Lisa and Toni from talking to anyone:

Lisa: Well it was something I kept to myself... I didn't think I should talk to someone about how I'm feeling 'cos I would probably be too scared of getting upset and of course of people finding out.

As a result of isolation from their peers, both Lisa and Rachel had low self esteem and became depressed:

Lisa: I thought no-one liked me and I was quite negative about myself ... a lot of the times I was depressed and I didn't know why.

Rachel felt that she hit rock bottom after a relationship did not work out and she had no-one to turn to talk about it with:

Rachel: My self-esteem, which is really important, just flew out the door, my confidence was gone and the only time I've
ever felt that low was when I realised that my real father had left and I was definitely down.

Stressful Closet Coping Strategies

Because it was not safe for eight of the participants to be open about their emerging lesbianism with their peers, various strategies were devised to deal with the disparity between their emerging lesbian feelings and the values of their peers. Coleman’s (1982) adolescent developmental theory, provides useful explanations for the high level of drinking that has traditionally been a feature of lesbian and gay communities compared to the general population. He maintained that drug and alcohol usage was one of the ways in which lesbians and gays coped with exploring the possibility that they may be lesbian or gay and what this can involve. Previous research such as Khayatt, 1994; Sears, 1991; Stapp, 1992; Trenchard and Warren, 1984 have also identified strategies that lesbians and gays have used. All participants in this study have engaged in a number of these strategies.

Jackie felt that she used socialising and drinking as a way to cover up her feelings:

Jackie: I used to go out a lot, didn’t care about anything, kind of covering it up with other things.

She perceived that she drank a lot to fit in with her peers and hide her feelings:
Jackie: Going out on the weekends... was always an horrific time and I just kept getting sloshed

She also drank alcohol to deal with her emerging lesbian identity and to fit in with friends:

Jackie: (I was) ... drinking to get drunk ... it's just some ... sort of backlash or because I didn't really feel like I needed to be accepted by my friends, they were accepting me, I think that I wasn't accepting me I suppose ... I think that more than trying to fit in with my friends, I was uncomfortable with myself and how I was perceived, so I drank.

Khayatt (1992) has noted that many lesbian educators compartmentalize their lives in order to deal with their lesbian identities in the workplace. In order to cope with their emerging lesbian identities, Isobel and Cathy used similar strategies. They felt that separating out the different areas of their lives was difficult for them to manage:

Cathy: I felt in a lot of ways that I had a secret life out of school and that was quite stressful sort of just keeping that life and my school life separate ... I'd almost have to change my whole personality with my clothes before I went out, then getting into the mature mode and going out and going clubbing or just being with my older friends and coming back to school on Monday morning.
Isobel: I lived this really schizophrenic existence ... I'd get up at 7.30 am and go to school like a little school girl and then come home to this completely other world and where all my pattern and my self lay and go off and work in the theatre ... I found the balance between that and working for my living to support myself too hard.

On the other hand, Rachel felt that her ability to adapt herself readily to different situations aided her in disguising her lesbianism:

Rachel: Also I think I'm quite adaptable as well.

Relationships with Males

Six of the participants undertook sexual relationships with young men to disguise their lesbianism from their peers. This strategy has been noted by other researchers (Khayatt, 1994; Sears, 1991; Stapp, 1992)

Vita: (Having relationships with guys) also disguised how others wouldn't think that I was gay. ... The fact that I had boyfriends was good enough. People knew that I was like a tomboy but they just didn't click on.

Cathy: ... I sort of used him as a cover in certain situations.

Melissa: ...nobody thought I was strange I suppose cos I did have a boyfriend tucked away somewhere... I considered myself heterosexual at the time, although I also thought I could be a lesbian.
Cathy felt that she was able to just go along with her friends' assumption that she was heterosexual:

Cathy: Well people would sort of laugh about it and go, 'Who's your boyfriend?' and I just sort of went along with them and said, 'This person's very nice' and 'This person's like that' and never actually mentioning a gender.

In social situations Jackie realised that the sexual advances she made to young men confused her friends whom she already had told that she was a lesbian:

Jackie: (I'd) snog a guy if I possibly could... my friends would say what are you doing?, it's a man!

She perceived that the reason she did this was that becoming a lesbian was a frightening prospect for her:

Jackie: I hadn't come out to my parents at that stage... I think I probably had slept with a woman by that stage as well... Just some sort of fear.

Three of the interviewees also attempted relationships with young men to see whether heterosexuality was still an option for them:

Melissa: I came out but I was still sleeping with this guy, so I guess I was having a last ditch attempt at heterosexuality.
Cathy: I was still at the stage where I was thinking well maybe I just haven't met the right guy, maybe I'll sort of grow out of it if I get out and meet a lot of nice guys but alas that wasn't to be.

Rachel: ... I was just experimenting .... trying things out to see whether it was possible for me to have a relationship with a guy or not.

Projecting Images

Rachel felt that by projecting a feminine image she was also able to hide the fact that she was a lesbian from her peers:

Rachel: ...I think in another way I also came across as being really feminine.

Vita perceived that she projected an image of frankness and honesty to her friends in order that they would not think that she had any secrets to hide:

Vita: ...my friends all said we thought you were a very open person and... I know at the beginning I did deliberately try and show as if I was really open but ... it just became second nature... there was a whole other life going on that they didn’t know about.
She thought that she became an overachiever in order to not have to deal with her sexuality:

Vita: In 7th form I threw myself into a lot of things and achieved a lot, probably to... not have to address that issue of sexuality at all.

However, Vita also perceived that getting on with her life and receiving recognition for her achievements made her feel better about herself:

Vita: 7th form was good in... that I went on with other things which had been affecting me before that time ... and that was good because in doing all these amazing things I was getting... rewards for those teachers who were getting to recognise me.

Toni thought that she played the role of class clown to stop herself thinking about the implications that being a lesbian would have for her:

Toni: I used to be the entertainer. Instead of talking about any thing serious I’d play around, anything to stop me thinking I was a lesbian and to stop thinking about the consequences of that decision.

She also felt that she acted as a counsellor and protector to her peers because there had never been anyone there to listen to her:
Toni: I became protector of the innocent... I was consciously a protector, consciously a counsellor... nobody had ever been there for me and I wanted to be there for my friends...

**The damaging effects**

Coleman (1982) maintains that victimisation by society often results in low self-esteem and self-abuse. Individuals marginalised by society can perpetuate the process of victimisation on themselves. He goes on to say that because many homosexual and bisexual persons do not learn positive conceptions of themselves, they never get beyond these barriers.

Five of the interviewees felt that schoolwork paled into insignificance compared to other things that were happening in their lives and as a result, their school work deteriorated:

Cathy: I sort of felt that I had ... so much important stuff going on that was going to affect my life forever like losing a father and deciding my sexuality .... algebra seemed trivial.

Alice: it (dealing with my sexuality) took up heaps of mental energy and definitely, it was just something that I couldn't ignore and so a lot of my concentration was put onto that rather than doing any ... school work.
Toni: My last year was completely fucked, I did piss all work... I couldn't concentrate to be honest ... I would be thinking instead.

Isobel would have failed due to her poor attendance but was saved at the last minute by winning a national award:

Isobel: I had a six percent attendance rate but I achieved something on a national level which redeemed me.

Self destructive behaviour and suicide ideation

Research undertaken Trenchard and Warren (1984) and Sears (1991) suggests that young lesbians and gay men are an at risk group of adolescents. Coleman (1982) also maintains that homosexuals are likely to internalise society's rejection of them, and this can be manifested in various forms of self abusive behaviour.

The findings of this study endorses that information but with qualifications. One young woman undertook self mutilation. While five of the interviewees contemplated suicide during their adolescence, none of them actually attempted it. In addition all of those who experienced suicide ideation felt that being a lesbian was only one of the factors involved in feeling suicidal. They acknowledged that there were other features of their lives which contributed to them feeling desperate enough to contemplate taking their own lives.

Toni felt that she contemplated suicide because she felt isolated and alone:
Toni: I felt like there was no one there that I could talk to ...

She was also worried at the possible rejection she may experience from other people if she told them she was a lesbian:

Toni: It was the thought of people's reactions (to the fact that you were a lesbian) ... the thought of confronting people with it openly means that you lay yourself open to being rejected.

Toni thought that long periods of solitude and introspection triggered off thoughts of attempting suicide:

Toni: I still feel as if I needed someone to talk to, about trying to commit suicide, because I thought about it a hell of a lot... I was home alone and it was dangerous because I was alone and it was dark and I would think a lot, too much, and go off the deep end and I thought about it but I never actually attempted to put the knife against my wrist... and I ... ended up punching the bathroom door. I was hitting it in time to the music. It was just one of my breaking points. It was isolation, I'd been sitting in the lounge carving initials into my forearm (saying) Let Me Die. I just felt that I was so alone that I wanted to die.

Rachel and Cathy both contemplated suicide because of relationship problems:
Rachel: My emotions were like shit and I knew that I just had to keep going. I've heard about people committing suicide and stuff because they're gay and I presumed that it was because they've been in love with someone and got rejected.

She remembered it as a very painful experience which knocked her self esteem considerably:

Rachel: It lasted for too long and it took ages for me to feel good about myself and I also lost a lot of trust in myself because I was so shocked ... The memory that I have of it is having my hands in my face and just crying.

Rachel thought that at the time she recognised what makes people kill themselves and was determined to deal with it herself. Although she felt desperate, she knew she would not actually attempt suicide:

Rachel: And to me people who have committed suicide haven't been able to see the light at the end of the tunnel and I knew that if I kept going today that I would see the light at the end of the tunnel even though I didn't then. There's no way that I would kill myself, because I haven't got the guts to do it, it doesn't even come into consideration but I just wanted to hurry up and get out of feeling down.

Cathy thought that she felt suicidal in a relationship in which she was trapped and unhappy:
Cathy: (I got out) basically before I slit my wrists. It felt like at the time it was coming to that stage.

Melissa felt that the only thing that prevented her from attempting suicide was the fact that she had supportive older friends and knew lesbians who were living happy lives:

Melissa: My only out was a very good friend of mine who was actually the first one that I told was lesbian and the fact that I did know of lesbian women. Possibly that was what kept me from killing myself, that I did have an outlet, but if I hadn’t known anybody that might have been the last straw.

They all perceived that coming to terms with being a lesbian was a contributing factor in their use of at-risk behaviours rather than the sole reason for their actions:

Cathy: Being a lesbian and sort of coming out as a lesbian at the same time as my father was dying did affect the way I felt about school... the combination of both but never just being a lesbian.

Feelings of suicide were intertwined with low self esteem as well discomfort about sexuality for Lisa:

Lisa: There were times that I thought about suicide. Not merely because of my sexuality but also then because of
my feelings about myself. I knew I suffered from depression back then. ... I just had a hard time coping with my life at the time.

Alice: ... I felt like I was kind of falling over, had heaps of things that I just wasn't feeling good about and then this (dealing with sexuality) on top of it as well...

Isobel: I was coming to pieces as far as that was concerned anyway because it was just too hard to live in a really violent, dysfunctional home environment and go to school and be a normal coping human being the next day and have that pressure of having a bigger work load and everything came on, it was coming to pieces, it wasn't working at all.

Melissa: I think probably if I couldn't see that there had been a better life for me then I would have killed myself but I pretty much knew when I was suicidal, I pretty much knew that I was lesbian ...

Long term effects of hiding lesbian identity

Coleman (1982) maintains that many individuals do not get beyond the exploration stage. Chronic emotional pain experienced since childhood can result in the individual experiencing difficulties with sexual expression that can lead to problems in developing intimacy. He refers to this as developmental lag. This delay in psycho-social development was also identified in Sears 1991 study.
Jackie felt that the isolation she experienced as a result of being a lesbian has affected her level of openness with people later in life:

Jackie: I am not as open as I would like to be, you know I, if there was a situation where I can get away without saying that I am a lesbian, then I will, like I haven't, like at work, I haven't come out at work and I would like to be able to do that ...

Cathy felt that having to hide her lesbianism for a long period of time has meant that she finds it difficult to express her feelings:

Cathy: I think in a lot of ways it taught me to be quite secretive about things that are special to me or things that are important to me... I think that through those ... four and a half years of having this on my mind and even like with my family I wasn't discussing it... Just having it on my mind and then turning it over and turning it over and turning it over and not having any outlet was ... a bit damaging anyway. Because I know that I still find it really hard to tell people about important things like that, like discussing things... I think I definitely learnt to keep things to myself.

Isobel felt that the negative messages she received about being a lesbian meant that she has always repressed the sexual side of herself:
I think that it's always been okay for me intellectually in my mind cerebrally to live that way that I've chosen to live... but I've never thought of myself as a sexual person. I've always worn this really asexual uninterested androgynous label and avoided intimate physical (contact) when I could. It's always been a really hard issue for me and I think that that actually has to do with some kind of repression on a really subconscious level ... it has absolutely has not been okay to feel lustful or desirous of another woman. It's not conscious. It's been really quite a long time surfacing. I've never been able to feel those things because I think that deep down I've felt it's not okay to feel those things that it's really quite disgusting to feel physical pleasure or attraction or desire for another woman and I never thought of that as having anything to do with my sexuality before as it relates to other women but I think now that it probably does ...

She thought that if she had been heterosexual that there would have been much more room to explore her sexuality. She felt a tremendous loss and sadness about this and it wasn't until after the interviews that she came back to me with the realisation of what had happened to her:

If I did have these feelings about men, which I don't, I probably would have felt freer to explore those feelings from a younger age I think. But as it stands I've always been completely terrified of it. I amputated it by myself. But I've always completely denied that.
The repression of the sexual side of herself has affected her ability to be intimate with other people:

Isobel: \(\ldots\) I've always said it's just not an important part of me, that I've got other ways of expressing my love and come up with these appalling excuses to avoid it, its been the hardest thing to do, to acknowledge that because to acknowledge that means it acknowledges a weakness to me, it makes me feel weak, that I might need something.

Alice: wondered what connections there were between her anorexia and coming to terms with her sexuality:

Alice: \(\ldots\) when I was sick I had no sexuality anyway, I wasn't attracted to anyone. And I'm not sure if that is to do with maybe sub-consciously wanting to avoid the entire sexuality issue by \(\ldots\) attempting to keep my body 'young' or something along those lines. Also, just recently, I've met so many other young women who have the similarity of an eating disorder and then coming out as a lesbian or bi-sexual.
CHAPTER 9: CHANGE: A CASE STUDY

Feminist scholars have forgotten to take notice of how firmly young women resist alone and sometimes together.  

(Fine, 1992: 178)

Belinda: People seem to respect me more because I’m so open about it and proud. I’m not scared to openly state I’m a lesbian.

Sears (1991) stressed the importance of documenting the strengths of young lesbians and gay men and the strategies that they used to maintain themselves in often hostile environments. This chapter investigates one such example of resistance and attempts to account for it.

Belinda’s experiences stand in marked contrast to the other young women interviewed for this study. She is the youngest of the participants and the only one currently attending school. During the course of this research she made the decision to come out as a lesbian at her school. In accounting for this difference there are three main factors that need to be taken into consideration. The first of these is the Human Rights legislation which came into effect late in 1993 and the recently revised Ministry of Education Guidelines, the second is Belinda’s family situation and the last is the nature of the school that she attends.
The contexts

The Human Rights Act passed in 1993 states that it is now illegal to discriminate on the grounds of sexual orientation. Within the context of this legislation, schools have a responsibility to ensure that they provide a safe and supportive environment for all students regardless of their sexual orientation.

In addition the Ministry of Education also issued national guidelines stating that students should be able to educationally reach their full potential, that all barriers to student achievement be removed and that special needs of students should be identified in order for them to receive appropriate support. In addition schools are required to provide a safe physical and emotional environment for students. (National Education Guidelines, 1993). Schools will be audited by the Education Review Office to demonstrate the process by which these changes are occurring in the school. Schools are therefore legally obliged to meet the needs of lesbian and gay students. These legislative changes provide a framework to support lesbian students and also to challenge the lack of provisions and support for them within schools.

The second factor which makes Belinda's situation different from the other young lesbians in this study is her family situation. Savin-Williams (1992) study revealed that the most stressful task for young lesbians and gay men is telling their families about their sexuality. This concern was also expressed by participants in this study. For Belinda, that fear is lessened by the fact that her mother is also a lesbian. She lives with her mother and her partner along with Belinda's sister and her partner's young child. Living in this environment provides
Belinda with a lot of support in coming to terms with herself as a young lesbian.

The third factor that played a part in Belinda's decision to come out at school is the nature of the school that she currently attends. The strongly multi-cultural urban mix of the school mean that it works hard to be an inclusive environment for all its students. It also has a strong and active guidance network that caters to a wide variety of student needs. In addition there are lesbian and gay teachers within the school that Belinda knew about and approached for support.

The process

With the help of the guidance counsellor and administrators at her school, Belinda has helped to establish a support group for lesbians, bisexuals and young women who are questioning their sexuality. Belinda made the decision to do this because she needed support and thought that there may be other young women who do too:

Belinda: I just felt a need for it and I knew there was a need for it somewhere. I wanted to meet other young lesbians.

The first stage of the process was that she stopped denying that she was a lesbian when her peers questioned her:

Belinda: It was a rumour that was going around and I just stopped denying it. People would just say to me 'Are you a, a, a an?' and they wouldn't be able to say the word

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1 Conversation with the Principal 21/ 8/94
'lesbian' so I would say, 'A vegetarian?, a pilot?', and they would in the end ask me and I'd just say 'Yes'.

Belinda thought that she had received a great deal of support at her school from lesbian teachers and administrators and this had made the experience a great deal easier for her:

Belinda: If I hadn't known Ms Francis was a lesbian, I wouldn't have found it as easy to talk to her about the group ... Initially I went to two teachers and asked them if they would help in supporting the group and keeping it going. (they were both) really supportive ...

Belinda also appreciated the unexpected support that she received from one of her heterosexual teachers. One teacher expressed admiration for Belinda and challenged the prejudice of her peers:

Belinda: I was supported by my teacher who talked to the class and tried to make them understand that homosexuality wasn't wrong and that they should respect me for being so brave. It made me feel really strong and supported, I was actually really amazed, he'd never spoken his views before.

During the process of being more open about her lesbianism Belinda recognised that she had misjudged the personal qualities and skills of the guidance counsellor and the support she was able to offer:
Belinda: My impressions of the school counsellor were completely wrong. She is an amazing, supportive and caring woman. She admires the strength and courage (my lesbian and bisexual friends) and I have.

Belinda perceived that she was able to regain trust in the counsellor because of the support she offered the group of lesbian and bi-sexual students. She appreciated the counsellor not only because of her professional skills but also because she perceived the guidance counsellor as supporting the notion of lesbianism as a positive choice for young women:

Belinda: I think I got to trust her because of the support we got from her and because she supported us, not only as a counsellor but also as a friend, she supported lesbianism in general.

Belinda also felt grateful for the ongoing support that the counsellor provided to deal with the harassment the group was facing from their peers:

Belinda: (We) went to see the counsellor recently to talk to her about the harassment and discrimination we were getting and how it was very stressful and hard for us and she was furious.

As a result, the Principal has since addressed the entire school assembly and sent a clear message to both staff and students that it was unacceptable to discriminate on the grounds of sexual orientation:
Belinda: ... the Principal ... talked to everyone in assembly about the Human Rights Bill and added in at the end sexual orientation and how it would be illegal to discriminate on the grounds of ... sexual orientation. Of course I and quite a few others were grateful to her for saying this.

As a result of the group being set up, Belinda noted that more students have joined:

Belinda: So far three of my friends have come out as bisexual and just recently I had a phone call from a seventh former who I don't know and she is a lesbian.

Belinda felt that there were some disadvantages to being so open about her lesbianism. She felt that she had become more of a label than an individual at school:

Belinda: Since I have come out at school I have become known as Belinda the lesbian and not Belinda the person.

Despite being on the receiving end of some homophobic attitudes from both staff and students, Belinda felt that she made a good move:

Belinda: People reacted in many ways. I was supported by a small group of people, mainly friends but I was harassed and discriminated against by a lot of people ... I lost a few friends, which in some ways was hard but I felt that if the person doesn't understand then they aren't worth
having as a friend ... things have become a lot different since I have come out, people's attitudes mostly but I don't regret it one bit.

Because of the existence of the lesbian and bi-sexual group and the ongoing support that the guidance counsellor and Principal provided, Belinda recognised that school is now a much more supportive environment for her to be in:

Belinda: ... the school has changed to meet my needs.

The changes that Belinda experienced during the course of this research therefore, are a combination of a number of different circumstances. They have resulted in giving her strong and positive feelings about her emerging lesbian sexuality.
CHAPTER 10: IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE

Belinda: I'd like people to have a better awareness of homosexuality and to learn that it's not bad and it's not disgusting ... and I think if people actually learnt more about it they'd actually, they wouldn't criticise people who are gay and respect them better.

I begin this chapter by discussing the implications of the findings in this study and why they reveal the need to change current practices in schools in order to cater to the needs of lesbian students more fully. This is followed by a detailed discussion of the ways in which schools could be made safer places for lesbian and gay youth. The strategies for change incorporate the perspectives of researchers and the participants of this study. Attention will also be given to three school-based intervention programmes for lesbian and gay youth which have been undertaken in the United States and the development of a lesbian and gay school in that country. Finally some suggestions are made regarding future research.

Implications

The findings of this study indicate that unless lesbian students attend a particularly progressive urban school and have very supportive families, their needs in secondary schools are not being met. Within a climate of institutional heterosexism, the majority of lesbian students voices are silenced and marginalised to the extent that they are often emotionally and mentally at risk. Rolfes (1989) identified recent United
States studies which indicate that lesbian and gay youth are two to three times more likely to commit suicide than other young adolescents. Educationalists must begin to question why this is and then investigate the action that schools can take to remedy the situation. Every piece of published research I have read written over the last ten years advocates clear and practical solutions to change the situation that young lesbians and gay men face within schools, and along with Rolfes, I query why so few educationalists have picked up the challenge. As he suggests, it is adults who have to be prepared to take up the rights of lesbian and gay youth because as Melissa pointed out, there are enough strains on young lesbians in schools as it is without expecting them to educate their teachers and peers:

Melissa: (It should be) done for them. (Young lesbians) shouldn't have to do it themselves, it's tough enough anyway.

The Human Rights Act which came into force in February 1994 made it illegal to discriminate on the grounds of sexual orientation. This legislation, along with the revised National Educational Guidelines, means that schools are now legally obliged to address this issue and can endeavour to cater to the needs of lesbian and gay students more fully.

**Recommendations for change**

Apple (1983) and Alton-Lee and Densem (1992) recognise the powerful role that the overt and hidden curriculum plays in reproducing the dominant culture within schools. In the case of sexuality, the
dominant ideology of heterosexuality silences lesbian and gay sexualities.

Previous studies highlighted the need to break the silence that surrounds the issue of lesbianism in schools as did six of the interviewees in this study. Cathy felt that young children need to be presented with positive sexual alternatives and a tolerance of difference from early on in their educational careers. The participants believed that providing more information and knowledge about lesbian and gay issues for both teachers and students would go a long way in creating a more tolerant environment in schools:

Toni: ... they need to have it explained because it is lack of understanding that creates fear of the unknown, you can't have fear of the unknown if they know what it is.

Vita felt that schools should take their charters more literally and show how they respect difference and diversity in their educational practice. She recognised the importance of providing information to students about lesbianism so that they could make an informed choice:

Vita: .... I know there's this horrible school of thought that if you introduce homosexuality to pupils then automatically they are going to go for it ... that's like saying that because there's is free information about drug abuse that everyone is going to get into drugs ... if there is a lot of information and it is open about lesbianism ... doesn't mean everyone is going to try it.
Seven of the interviewees felt that lesbian material should be introduced into the mainstream curriculum. Melissa thought that the inclusion of lesbian material would mean that students would be more likely to discuss the issues raised in class and not have to raise the topic themselves:

Melissa: If it was brought up in classes then that would be a starting point. Students sit down at lunchtime and talk about what happened in class, so even just getting students talking about it is really good. I think it's also a way for lesbians or young women who think they might be lesbians if they can just hear what their mates think, they find out what their opinions are and can decide who to tell and who not to. That's one way they can safely bring it up themselves, which can be potentially dangerous.

She also thought that inclusion of lesbian material would present lesbianism as a viable option for young women. Suggestions for placing material on lesbianism into the mainstream curriculum by the young women included integrating lesbian and gay material into specific subjects. Vita thought that English would provide a good forum in which to discuss lesbian writers. Science and Social Studies were other curriculum areas mentioned by the participants.

Sexuality Education is regarded by both researchers and by the participants as a key area that has to change to incorporate the perspectives of lesbian and gay youth (Fine, 1992; Sears, 1992b). Four participants agreed. Fine (1992) noted that educationalists silenced
issues they perceived to be harmful to students in sexuality education. Isobel considers this approach unrealistic and unhelpful:

Isobel: I think people like to think that teenagers aren't thinking about those things, but it is precisely the time when they are, and everything is (happening) much younger now than ever before so it's just desperately needed I think.

Melissa and Cathy felt the introduction of lesbian material should begin early and be built on throughout the years a student attends school and that discussions of homosexuality should not be confined to a single slot once in sexuality education. Cathy also thought that wider issues which relate to homosexuality such as homophobia should also be raised.

Four interviewees felt that a useful strategy in teaching about lesbian and gay sexuality would be getting young lesbians and gay men in to talk to students. Cathy and Vita recognised that there were some schools who have positive initiatives underway and advocated that more schools should take up the challenge.

Within the last two years two New Zealand resource books dealing with lesbian and gay sexuality have been produced by the Family Planning Association and the AIDS Foundation. They both provide valuable information for schools. Affirming Diversity (1992) was produced by The Family Planning Association in recognition of the fact that the issue of sexual orientation is a key area that has not been addressed in sexuality teaching resources. It provides information on sexual orientations, guidelines that would enable schools to become more
inclusive in the area of sexuality education and a series of activities designed to raise the awareness of both adolescents and educators to issues of sexual orientation. The booklet also provides an extensive resource list. The publication provides in-depth cultural, historical, religious and legal perspectives on homosexuality in addition to information on H.I.V and A.I.D.S prevention. It offers teachers' suggestions on how to build anti-discrimination clauses into their school charters in order to protect lesbian and gay students and teachers within their institutions.

*Straight Talking* (1992) was produced by the AIDS Foundation. It provides resources which allow training programmes to be designed in order to encourage participants to examine, acknowledge and change homophobic attitudes. It aims to dispel myths about lesbians, gay men and bisexuals and recognise the extent of individual and institutional prejudice against lesbians and gay men and how this affects their lives. In addition to exploring ways in which heterosexism limits opportunities for all people, it suggests skills to support lesbians and gay men and aims to develop strategies against institutional discrimination.

Alton-Lee and Densem (1992) advocate that teachers must be educated about issues of gender in order for them to deconstruct the gendered curriculum and change curriculum resources to cater to the needs of young women in schools more fully. In a similar vein, recent research advocates that educationalists need to be educated about heterosexism and homophobia and the ways in which schools marginalise lesbian and gay experience. (Khayatt,1984; Sears:1991; Stapp, 1992). Seven of the young women also felt that educators could play an important role
in catering more fully to the needs of lesbian students in schools. They felt that teachers had a responsibility to break the silence that surrounded lesbian and gay subjects:

Rachel: Yes, because they run it, they're the ones up the front of the class ... basically they just gotta let kids know that's it's okay.

Like researchers, Melissa felt that teachers need to take a stronger lead in challenging the verbal and physical harassment that lesbian students have to face. She thought that teachers need their awareness raised concerning the issues young lesbians face and their knowledge about homosexuality increased:

Melissa: All the teachers should do a homophobia workshop ... Taking the mystery away from it all I suppose. I think most people, some people inside don't even know what a lesbian is, when it seems ...like (a) strange and mysterious world, so I guess doing work on breaking down the barriers, the stereotypes and pointing out to teachers that there are normal lesbians like announcers on T.V and Martina Navoratilova and Melissa Etheridge ... just remind them that there are lesbian women who are very much in the public eye.

Rachel thought that there should be an onus on teachers to deal with their personal prejudices about lesbians and gays because their attitudes influenced students:
Rachel: They've got to feel comfortable with it themselves, because it won't go any further than that if they don't. The kids will feel the essence of it if they do feel o.k. with it, it'll come across.

Melissa thought that the school administration had a role to play in creating a climate of safety in their school for lesbian educators which would then have a trickle down effect to the students. One of her suggestions was that boards should begin to employ lesbian teachers who would be prepared to act as role models for students. Vita, Alice and Melissa felt that out and successful lesbian teachers would provide good role models for young lesbian students. Belinda and Melissa felt that out lesbian teachers would make homophobic students more likely to question their prejudice:

Belinda: I think it's really important that teachers be open about themselves as lesbians. I think that if all teachers were open about it then maybe the students would feel differently and support homosexuality instead of criticising it all the time.

Previous researchers and the participants in this study suggest that counsellors have an important role to play in breaking down the silence that surrounds lesbian issues in school. Three participants emphasised the importance of counsellors being able to accept same sex attractions as normal:

Isobel: ... you don't want to come out to a counsellor and have that momentary look of panic or shock or freaking out
because that would ... be quite horrific .... They just need to be really positive, reaffirming, reinforcing.

Cathy and Isobel also felt that they needed to be knowledgeable about lesbian and gay issues. Liason with lesbian and gay support agencies and the ability to refer clients on was perceived to be important as were good listening skills:

Jackie: ... just really there to listen and offer advice, when it is needed... someone who would be a good listener and really support her and someone she could talk to.

The participants felt that schools should consider the provision of female counsellors for young lesbians and the need for lesbian, gay and bisexual counsellors. Four of the participants thought that more publically displayed visual information should be available in schools for young women who are questioning their sexuality:

Cathy: I think to me even one poster on the noticeboard in the hallway saying 'Gayline' or 'Young People's Gay and Lesbian Network' would have been a really uplifting experience, if I could see that in a high school I'd be really happy

Previous studies emphasise the importance of school libraries offering a wide range of current and accessible information for lesbian and gay youth. The participants also felt this was an important step towards schools meeting their needs.
Melissa: ... having books in the library, books that answer questions and dispell myths I think is really important, even sticking them out on display. Resource material is really important.

Just as previous research recognises that heterosexism in schools reflects the homophobic attitudes of wider society, Isobel believed that changing attitudes in schools rested on a change in the attitudes of society at large:

Isobel: ... you’d have to redress the attitude of our whole society to readdress the attitude within the education system ... Until our society in general is more caring and understanding and it accommodates people who identify as being homosexual; children are the cruellest creatures. The school ground I think is one of the biggest battle grounds on earth for many reasons, there are these children who turn up there every day and they are basically little receptacles of everything they've been taught and parental conditioning and it's those attitudes that get thrown at one another.

Rachel recognised that there may be an adverse reaction from some parents to an increased level of information about lesbians in schools. Her solution was to make the change quietly but in a uniform way:

Rachel: If they are going to bring it into schools, they should bring it into every school at the same time, so that if one
kid does get taken out of school to another they're gonna hit the same thing there.

The participants agreed with Schuster and van Dyne's (1984) observation that changes of this scale are a huge undertaking and something which will not happen overnight:

Toni: In the next generation I think it needs to be made clear that its o.k. because then it will just follow through and when that generation does come up and this is the generation that says its o.k. they won't know any different. They won't know about the negative side of it, I think it is starting.

School based support projects for lesbian and gay youth

The United States currently has three school based programmes in operation to cater to the needs of lesbian and gay youth. The first and most well known of these is Project 10. It is based in Los Angeles at Fairfax High School. It is a school based counselling programme that began in 1984 in response to the unmet needs of lesbian and gay youth in schools. The focus of the model is education, reduction of verbal and physical abuse, suicide prevention and accurate AIDS information. The project aims to improve the self-esteem of lesbaian and gay youth by providing accurate information and non-judgemental counselling for them.

Project 10 is a dropout prevention programme. the services it provides include workshops and training sessions for administrators and staff,
informal counselling for students, out reach to parents, peer counselling, substance abuse and suicide prevention programmes. The key components of education, counselling and support services have begun to be considered as a model by other American cities, and the Director, Virginia Uribe has assisted other school districts in establishing similar programmes (Rolfes, 1989).

As a result of a Government funded study conducted into the needs of lesbians and gay youth the Massachusetts project called 'Creating Safe schools for Lesbian and Gays' was set up in July, 1993. It is the only state in United States where lesbians are receiving support from both the government and the Department of Education. The goal of the programme is to facilitate on-site training in every high school in Massachusetts in order to improve support services for lesbian and gay youth. Schools are being encouraged to develop policies protecting students from violence, harassment and discrimination. They are also providing training to personnel in the prevention of suicide and violence, and forming support groups and counselling for family members.

Under the auspices of the Hettrick Martin Institute, the Harvey Milk School for lesbian and gay students in New York was established to cater to the needs of lesbian and gay students who could not survive within the New York school system due to high levels of harassment and intimidation. The school currently serves the needs of around twenty-four students with an additional two hundred served in outreach programmes for street kids. It offers students a traditional academic curriculum but they are also provided with a wide range of social services. The School offers a family counselling programme in
addition to a support group for HIV-positive youth. It also assists young people with AIDS.

The recent Human Rights Act has provided an important impetus for New Zealand educational developments to assist lesbian and gay youth and raise educators' awareness of heterosexism in schools. The Post Primary Teachers' Association Initiative, 'Creating Safe Schools For Lesbians and Gays' is only in its formative stages but has the potential to bring about positive change within secondary schools. The liaison between GLEE and the Human Rights Commission to run workshops for secondary school principals and boards of trustees on issues that confront lesbian and gay students in schools is another development that has a great deal of potential to raise the awareness of educationalists about heterosexism and its negative effects on lesbian and gay youth.

Further Research

Describing the experiences of lesbian students is the first phase of working towards a change of attitudes that needs to happen for these young women to feel safe in secondary schools. This study contributes another voice to the developing body of research on the educational needs of lesbian and gay youth. Because of the paucity of research in this area, there is a need for further studies to be undertaken.

There is a pressing need for researchers to focus on the problem of homophobia and institutional heterosexism in schools, rather than lesbian and gay students. Studies also need to be undertaken into the ways in which heterosexism manifests itself within specific areas of
education such as the curriculum or the counselling field or policy. Heterosexism and its influence in our schools must be taken seriously. It can often be a matter of life and death for young lesbians. Vita sums it up well when she says:

Vita: Silence equals loneliness and confusion, openness means education and understanding.
LAST WORDS: THE YOUNG LESBIANS SPEAK

This was probably the first document that I've ever read that I could wholly devour with complete understanding and insight, though it's tinged with a certain irony and sadness that there were/are others left to face themselves and their sexuality alone.

I know that all of your hard work will open minds and eyes to this silent void. I hope that our contributions will give young lesbians the information and support that we so badly missed out on.

Being able to share my experiences and reading those of others has helped in establishing my identity as a young lesbian and woman. I hope that such an important and relevant study will earn its place in schools and in the hands of teachers, counsellors and especially the young women who deserve it the most.

- Vita

I am really glad to have contributed to this research. For me, the prominent issue that emerged was the lack of lesbian information available to me when I attended high school. I can look back now and know that when I was at high school I was struggling with my identity. I knew that I was a lesbian but I felt so alone and isolated that I withdrew into myself so as not to confront my feelings. That was wrong but I didn't understand it at the time. There was just nowhere for me to turn, or so I thought at the time.
It was really positive reading the material because it gives so many different viewpoints as to what young lesbians go through during their teenage years. And if this information can assist in any way to bring about change then I am proud to have contributed. There certainly needs to be an environment for young lesbians and gays in which they can be themselves without fear. For fear is what stops us from growing, moving on from where we are.

I would like to think that from this study there will be changes made in schools so that people have access to lesbian and gay information and that through this information and support they will be able to decide for themselves how they felt. So if they are a young lesbian or gay person they will at least not be feeling alone.

It has been good looking back at myself from my involvement in this study. I do feel sad though about the fact that at the time I felt I had nowhere to go for support in coming out as a lesbian. It makes me want to get out there and demand change. I think of how my life could have been different if society held different attitudes, still that is not the issue. I have come out of my school period a better person for doing what I want with my life.

- Lisa

Taking part in this research has made me realise just how limited and silenced the information and general knowledge of homosexuality and bisexuality is; I don't think it should have an entirely separate or special agenda, but that it does deserve more space and volume than currently given.
Labelling, it seems to me, was very important to me at the time of being interviewed. However, now that my emerging sexuality is no longer a concern, labelling or being specifically one thing or another is no longer of importance. Becoming comfortable with my sexuality has meant that sexuality is now something that I see as non-static and changeable.

Retracing the emergence of and issues surrounding my sexuality has helped raise my personal awareness. Silence and invisibility were so destructive when coming out it seemed like everyone must be heterosexual and that anyone who wasn't was so invalid, dispensable and bad. It is fear that causes the silence and invisibility but it is also the same silence and invisibility that perpetuates the fear.

The interviewing process and subsequent introspection has strengthened and motivated me to be honest open and proud of myself as a queer woman.

- Alice

My life-line, my ability to maintain my integrity came mostly from my ability to live in a self-created world in which I could believe in the strength of my feelings and their validity. I became very self-contained and learned to draw on inner resources to survive, rather than reaching out to anyone if I was in need: this really stemmed from a mistrust and fear of being hurt.

- Isobel

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I originally skimmed through this stuff alone and then sat down and read it with a friend. It’s nearly been a year since I said this stuff and I kept thinking, "Surely I never told her that!". Unfortunately I know I did. Boy, you are a smooth operator getting that stuff from deep down. I especially refer to that stuff I said about drinking. It made me a little uncomfortable to re-read it. I think it all feels like it happened a long time ago, and if I could do I could do it all again. It would be a really full-on smooth trip through school time.

At the same time I’m glad I did this because people can feel a bit complacent about growing up gay or lesbian and lest we forget and all that. Anyway, thanks for the chance to do this.

- Jackie

I have enjoyed working with you while giving you the information you needed for your research. It was quite interesting to read the information I initially gave you and compare it to the information I gave you recently. I’ve changed so much.

It was interesting to read the comments the other young lesbians have made about their coming out experiences and compare them to mine. Most of them were quite different. I gained a lot from the interviews being able to express feelings and ideas about issues concerned with young lesbians.

Thanks, Belinda

I could write so much, I could write a comment about every comment! What excited me about the research was the thought of being part of
something which could change things for lesbians at school. It was a pure buzz flicking through the research for the first time. The invisible lesbians made visible.

One thing I noticed when reading the research was how grateful we all were for the crumbs teachers occasionally threw us, any small comments about lesbians. I hope one day lesbian issues are integrated into schools and it will become as socially accepted as any other topic. Just another part of secondary school experience. Baby dykes all over N.Z will breathe a sigh of relief... can you see that Kathleen? This is important research, check out the suicide statistics for young gays and lesbians. If I remember rightly it's 3 times higher than their heterosexual peers. If school culture changes maybe some young lives will survive to become strong lesbian and gay adults.

- Melissa

I really did enjoy our interviews. It was the first time I'd really talked about my experiences in so much depth with anyone. To be honest, I think it's helped me to understand what happened better than I did before. I found it really easy to talk to you Kathleen (as the length of my interviews will confirm) and I felt safe telling you things I hadn't previously told anyone.

As far as bringing up issues goes, for me, being a part of this research was a bit of an awakening. It gave me the strength, or at least the ability to come out to my mother and to tell her about the hard time I had in my last year of school.
It has also made me aware of the need for young women thinking they may be lesbian to have lesbians they can not only see but talk to as well ... This really showed up in what Belinda said about her teacher... it is because of this that I'm trying to start up a young coming out group here.

To sum it up in one line, being involved in this research has moved me to take positive action so that the isolation I felt need not be felt by others that follow. I think I got a lot more out of this than you did.

Cheers,Toni

Thank you for this opportunity. Many different things have happened since I first talked with you. Far too much to write down, but all in the direction of coming out as a Strong Positive Spunky dyke!!! (Yippee).

Love, Rachel.

A Poem

Several Common Stages of Dyke Suffering In Eight Short Stanzas

How can you know?
You as straight as they come.
You look at me,
but your eyes are panicking.

Don't look at me like that!
Fuck, I ain't from outer space

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I can almost see you withdrawing
two years of friendship, fuck you.

Careful you don't touch me -
It might be communicable.
Great, now I get the sympathy stare
Baby, I'm happy where I'm at.
I explain teacher style
but I can feel my smokers hand shaking
and that oft known urge to kick something-hard.

You say you'll ring me
Liar.
You're wasting your time with me
Your eyes speak different words.

Finally we stand together in this feign of truth
You just created an impassable valley
Truly we stand on opposing pinnacles

I look across wiping my bitter tears
For your back is turned
and you are walking away.

I watch your retreating figure awhile
then turn myself
we walk in unison again
just no longer side by side.
Melissa 16 years.
APPENDIX

Interview Schedule

Participant data
- Age now
- Ethnic identity
- What age were you when you left school?
- How long have you identified as a lesbian to yourself and others?
- Did you go to a private, Catholic or state secondary school?
- Was your school single sex or co-educational- was your school in a rural or urban setting?
- What form were you in when you left school?

Peer culture
1. Did you see yourself as a popular person at school? Did you have particular friends?, a large peer group?
2. Can you remember any mention of lesbians and gays being made by your fellow students. Describe what happened and how you responded?
3. Did you feel able to be open about being a lesbian with your peers? Describe how your friends would have reacted to the knowledge that you were a lesbian. How did this make you feel about yourself?.
4. Did you know any other lesbian students? Describe how you related to them.
5. Did you know any gay male students at school or have any thing to do with them? Did you see yourself as having anything in
common with gay male students? Describe any feelings you have on this issue.

Social/Sexual activities

1. Who were you closest to when you were at school? Were you in any intimate relationships? Describe how and why you got into them and how they were for you.

Teachers

1. How did you feel about the teachers that you had at school? Did they do anything important that either affected or upset you?
2. Did you have any relationships with teachers that you really admired? Describe them and their importance to you. What sort of relationship did you have with them?
3. Do you remember any mention that teachers made of lesbian or gays? Describe what happened and your reaction to it.
4. Do you remember if any of your teachers was a lesbian? How did you know? Did they make it openly known? Describe how they related to you. How did this affect your view of yourself as a lesbian?

Curriculum

1. Who were the people that you learnt about at school that you really admired and thought made a significant contribution to the world?
2. What sort of information did you get at school about relationships, choices, sex, sexuality, A.I.D’s.
   - heterosexuality (contraception, pregnancy, abortion, relationships)
• male homosexuality
• lesbian issues
• self esteem

2. Do you remember any mention of the words lesbian or gay in subjects other than health or sexuality? Describe what you remember. What were your own responses?

3. Were there any books in the library which contained information on lesbian or gay issues? Describe how accessible they were and your feelings about using them.

Counsellors

1. Who in the school did you seek out to talk to if you had any problems? Why did you choose them?

2. Did you see your school counsellor as approachable? Would you have approached the school counsellor if you needed to talk to an adult? Describe your feelings about this.

3. Describe any contact that you had with the lesbian or gay community outside of school. Was it useful for you?

Personal feelings

1. When did you first start to think that you might be a lesbian? How has this changed over time?

2. Were you aware that you may have been a lesbian when you were at school? How did this affect the way you felt about yourself and your ability to be open about being a lesbian?

3. Describe how being a lesbian affected your feelings about school.
• self esteem
• attendance
• relationships with teachers
• relationships with peers
• academic progress and success
• Leaving school

4. Who did you know at school who would support you as a lesbian? Describe the support that you received.

5. How did you go about accepting and affirming your identity as a lesbian? What has been most helpful to you in that respect?

Coping behaviours

1. What were the major highlights and difficulties for you when you were at school? Describe them.

2. Describe the ways in which you coped with the problems. What could have made school easier for you?

3. parent, what do you think that schools should offer her?
• Attitudes of teachers?
• Support? Counsellors, what skills do they need
• Specific information about being a lesbian. In what format? What strategies do you suggest for using such a resource?
• Peer and teacher visibility?
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