

Teachers Behaving Badly? Dilemmas for school Leaders

Abstract

Teachers Behaving Badly? Dilemmas for School Leaders was published in October 04. This Inform discusses some of the issues addressed in more depth in the book. These issues are about the dilemmas that face all leaders when attitudes towards sex and sexuality start to change, and when their own personal beliefs may or may not coincide with these changes. At what point do private matters become public ones? At what point do these matters become issues that should concern leaders? When does the personal become professional? Are there absolute answers to these questions or do the answers change over time and from one culture to another? Leadership training does not usually include exposure to issues involving sexuality and sexual harassment but, in the current climate, many school leaders have no choice but to deal with such concerns.

In this paper, which concentrates on relations between adults in schools, some of the issues that leaders may have to address with regard to how sexuality may be manifested in schools are discussed.

Freud alerted social scientists to the presence of sexuality from the earliest age and stressed its importance in people's lives. But, ... the tendency in schools is to pretend it does not really exist even though it is visible in so many different facets. (Wolpe, 1988, p.158)

Changing times

A few years ago, a headteacher in the UK had to decide how to deal with a teacher who had official leave of absence to appear in the television show *Big Brother*. Her controversial behaviour on the programme included dropping her towel on leaving the shower knowingly in front of the cameras. This was thought by some to bring the school into disrepute. Although not many school leaders will have to confront this particular issue, they are likely to be faced with other complex dilemmas, also of a sexual nature, that demand a quick response. If lucky, they may be able to draw on previous professional experiences to help clarify reactions, but contexts are often different enough to require complete rethinking, as in the *Big Brother* scenario. When dealing with issues around sexuality, leaders also have to take into account changes in social attitudes as well as the situation of the individuals concerned.

School leaders working at the beginning of the 21st century are operating in an ever-changing context and are constantly having to make decisions that are affected by (and indeed contribute to) the mores of the time. Sexual behaviour may not have changed greatly over the years but what is considered *acceptable* sexual behaviour does change over time and has done so in the last few years in the UK. For example, societal attitudes have changed with regard to live-in partners, unmarried/sole parents and homosexuality. Consequently, partly due to societal attitudinal changes, experienced headteachers may find themselves dealing very differently now than they would have at the beginning of their career with staff who are: divorced; 'living' together in common law relationships; unmarried parents (particularly women); or with staff who are openly gay or lesbian.

Should headteachers 'keep up with the times' or should their values be constant and consistent over time? Does society expect headteachers of religious schools to behave differently from their secular counterparts? In particular how should all headteachers deal with sexual issues in an ever-changing context?

Sexuality in schools can involve adults and/or pupils. The book is not in the main about paedophiles. Much has been written elsewhere on this issue. *Teachers Behaving Badly?* is concerned about sexual behaviour that may occur between adults working in and connected to the school, and teacher/older pupil relations, initiated by both parties. Leaders faced with trying to sort out these issues find that they are not always clear-cut; often there are no easy resolutions; and the consequences may be potentially explosive – for the individuals concerned, for the school and for the community.

This paper concentrates on adults particularly teachers though, of course, these issues can affect support staff employed by the school and other adults involved with schooling, such as governors and inspectors.

The dilemma – when, if at all, should headteachers intervene?

Sex sells and stories involving sex are frequently used by the media in a sensational way. Sex/sexuality and schooling seems to be of particular interest. This may be because teachers are supposed to behave in an exemplary manner themselves and impose good behaviour amongst their pupils. Any example of 'teachers behaving badly', is likely to draw (usually unwelcome) attention.

Schooling is in one sense a public activity, since it is carried on outside the home. But the school remains for the pupils a segregated setting distinct from the adult world of work and other involvement. (Giddens, 1991, p.152)

Schools are complex organisations to manage. The public activity of schooling is often manifested through essentially private encounters between pupils and their teachers. These private encounters generally occur in classrooms behind closed doors. Even though these encounters take place in the privacy of the classroom, they are generally regarded as the legitimate business of school leaders and those to whom they are accountable. Governments legislate or advise on the curriculum and how it should be delivered. In the UK heads are accountable for the quality of education in their schools. So teachers are publicly accountable for an activity that takes place in private. (Private does not mean individual and generally these encounters are with groups of pupils.) Monitoring proceedings behind closed doors has to be based on trust and an (usually unwritten) agreement that certain behaviours are acceptable for a teacher and others are not. What happens outside the classroom, in the public areas of the school, for example, in the corridors or staffroom or even in the vicinity of the school, is more complex. Some interactions such as a teacher speaking to a colleague in the corridor during the school lunch period, will be regarded by most as still within the boundaries of the teacher's professional remit and therefore could be the proper concern of the school leader. However, an encounter between two teachers at lunchtime could be viewed as purely personal and nothing to do with the headteacher. Alternatively, the head might take the view that anything that happens on school premises, whatever the time of day, is his/her legitimate business, but is it still their business if this lunchtime encounter takes place at the cafe next to the school or if the encounter takes place at the weekend? The point here is that there is a very fine line between private business and professional business. This is particularly true when issues of sexuality are involved.

Sexuality: a subject which might seem a public irrelevance – an absorbing, but essentially private, concern. ... Yet in fact sex now continually features in the public domain ... (Giddens, 1993, p.1)

What are the boundaries? According to Giddens, "There is no known culture in which sexual behaviour has been carried on in a completely open way under the gaze of everyone" (1991, p.163). Sexual encounters are generally deemed to be private affairs but when does the private become professional?

Sexuality and teachers

Passion has become privatised; yet its implications and resonances are far from private. (Giddens, 1991, p.205)

Sexuality is ... both inescapable and very dangerous territory for teachers. The tightrope which they have to walk between their public roles and private lives is one with an inbuilt insecurity ... (Epstein & Johnson, 1998, p.123)

Not long ago, and still today in some religious schools (see Leney 2005) and some parts of the UK, sexual behaviour

between unmarried adults was considered immoral. The discovery of any such behaviour would be deemed a matter for the head to address. Women staff would invariably be asked to leave if they had a child 'out of wedlock'. Indeed, until very recent times, women teachers were not officially allowed to have sex at all. If they did so when unmarried they were "immoral" and if they got married they had to leave the profession anyway. The "marriage bar" in the UK was not finally lifted until 1944.

At the beginning of the 21st century it is not always clear-cut when, if at all, sexual behaviour of teachers is or should become a concern of the head. There are confusing messages about the extent to which teachers are expected to be moral exemplars and role models. Heterosexuals, homosexuals, bisexuals, transsexuals, and transvestites – any of whom could be practising or celibate – will be found amongst teachers (and headteachers), as in the rest of the population. Most of the time the sexuality and sexual behaviour of teachers and headteachers will have nothing to do with the institution in which they work, but on occasions this distinction may not prevail.

Many men and women relate to each other in a gendered way as a matter of course and the messages these interactions display are picked up by pupils. Writing about schools in the midlands in England, Duncan, a teacher researcher, observed that:

The highly gendered interactions between male staff ... appealed to many of the boys witnessing them. Physically powerful, authoritative and noble, the masculinity dominant in these images was digested by the pupil culture and its forms replayed in general social relations. (Duncan, 1999 p.121)

If a community expects its teachers to be model exemplars and upholders of moral virtues, there are obvious tensions if they then become involved in sexual behaviours that are deemed unacceptable and inappropriate. This of course raises the issue of what is inappropriate. (For some communities, as discussed by Epstein and Johnson [1998], any sexual relationship that is not heterosexual and married would fall into this category.) When situations involving 'inappropriate' sexual behaviour are brought to the attention of the head, s/he usually has little choice but to at least address the matter and, in some cases, intervene. Some issues seem to clearly fall into the category of intervention. An example where intervention would be expected is the discovery of a member of staff having a sexual relationship with a pupil in their care, but other examples (for instance, consensual sexual relations between adults in the school) may not be quite so clear-cut.

Even consensual relationships between teachers may present issues for the head. It is said that most adults meet their partners at work. If two members of staff start 'dating' it could be argued that this is no-one's business but theirs. (Even in this situation, though, headteachers may have to decide whether holding hands or kissing in front of colleagues or the pupils is appropriate behaviour on the school premises – or even in the vicinity of the school.) The scenario may get more complex if, for example:

- One or both of the teachers are married to someone else (or deemed to be 'attached');

- A teacher embarks on an affair with a married parent or school governor; or
- An 'available' parent or governor has an affair with a married teacher.

Some would argue that because of possible repercussions for the school, all these scenarios could be considered the business of the head. Even if both adults were 'available', it could be that the relationship is not consensual; one person could be pursuing the other without their feelings being reciprocated.

When issues of power are involved, as when an older and/or more senior member of staff pursues someone younger, it is not too difficult to see the possibility of sexual harassment emerging, as illustrated in the following vignette:

I worked in a school where an older, married teacher would press himself up against me at the office filing cabinet, under the pretence of offering help. At an office party I found out he was doing this to all the young women teachers, so I put a note on the filing cabinet saying: "Don't do any filing if you are alone in the room with (this man). He'll treat you like his personal property". He was so embarrassed that he stopped immediately. We could have gone to the headmaster, but the note was so effective we didn't need to make a fuss. (Williams, 2000, p.7)

Given the mores of our society, this scenario is most likely to be male to female but it is quite feasible that it could also be female to male. Of course, none of the scenarios previously described are restricted to heterosexuals, and all could be between gay men or between lesbians. Sexual stereotyping based on race makes these issues even more complicated.

Gay and lesbian teachers often find it very difficult to 'come out' and feel they have to live a life of deceit. For example, it can be difficult for them to easily participate in staffroom banter about partners or domestic life. Those who prefer to keep their sexuality private may be vulnerable to being 'outed' by colleagues, pupils, parents or governors. Sometimes the consequences for individuals and even a school can result in adverse publicity and be devastating for those involved. The ethos that a head seeks to create will have an effect on how supported gay and lesbian teachers feel.

Epstein and Johnson (1998) discuss the case of a teacher called Neil, for whom a visit to a friend known to be gay was observed by a mother of a pupil in the school in which Neil taught. The mother started making allegations about Neil: "The head reacted against the mother's homophobic abuse. She was not prepared to condone this overt bigotry." (p.138)

However:

Although she was ready to stand against overt homophobia, she had little grasp of the everyday lives of lesbian and gay teachers or of the risks to them as a result of being outed through chance circumstances or of the more pervasive character of sexual gossip about teachers generally. (p.139)

Uninformed concern about HIV and AIDS has also made the life of some gay teachers virtually unbearable, as described in the following extract:

Having been revealed as a homosexual during a protracted period of absence from school, he found that on his return he was the brunt of colleagues' fears about AIDS and that he was precluded from effectively discharging his duties as a deputy head. (Squirrell, 1989, p.23)

Squirrell goes on to describe how this teacher was isolated, his head refused to work with him, teachers left the staffroom when he entered and he was forced to take lunch on his own. The supply teacher covering his class refused to do so until the room had been 'scrubbed out'. Squirrell offers other examples on the same theme:

In one London school two openly gay teachers have been ostracised with colleagues refusing to use the same toilets or even coffee mugs. Teachers who are, or are suspected of being gay are suffering increased harassment from both pupils and colleagues. (London Gay Teachers group, 1985, quoted in Squirrell, 1989)

A recent survey of gay and lesbian teachers has indicated that things have not changed much in the last twenty years.

75% of gay & lesbian teachers say they have experienced discrimination at work. (TES survey 27.1.06 p.13)

Heads have to deal with the implications of their own sexuality as well as that of the people they manage. If headteachers themselves are gay or lesbian their decision about whether to keep this private or not can be a very difficult one to make. (See MacBeath and Myers, 1999.)

With regard to sexual behaviour, heads are not always the role models society expects. A short piece in the *Times Educational Supplement* under the headline 'Affairs head quits family school' read:

The head of a top church school has resigned after admitting a string of affairs. [name] stunned parents at ... Church of England School ... with a letter in which he confessed to 'extra-marital relationships'. Last week he resigned from the school, which prides itself on its 'family environment', the diocese of ... said. (TES, 23 November 2001, p.4.)

Internet porn is head's downfall

A headteacher who looked at pornographic websites during school time has been banned from teaching for two years. (Luft, 2005, p.17)

Head denies taking drugs

The headteacher of a prestigious grammar school in Buckinghamshire has been asked to stay away from the school while it investigates claims he took cocaine and cannabis he confiscated from pupils. (Shaw, 2006, p.8)

If society sees teachers and headteachers as role models and moral exemplars, the expectations do not stop at the end of the school day. There are implications for their behaviour outside of the confines of the school building and school hours. For example, Piddocke et al., (2000) quote a 1987 case in British Columbia, Canada, where a teacher was suspended because her husband submitted a semi-nude photograph of her to a photographic magazine and it was subsequently published. She was suspended on the grounds that:

Teachers are expected to be role models for their students and that this role includes upholding the values of the community outside the classroom as well as in it. (p.115)

Other facets of sexuality that heads may also have to address in their professional capacity include transvestism and transexuality. According to Pidcocke et al., (2000, p.151), transvestism is where a member of one sex dresses as a member of the other sex and transexuality is where a member of one sex tries to change his/her body until it fits the bodily form of the other sex. The authors quote a 1979 case in Alberta, Canada, where a teacher was dismissed for stealing women's clothes. The school board justified his sacking on two grounds. First, because he had pled guilty to the charge of stealing and second because:

He had manifested abnormal behaviour, which included storing women's clothing and accessories in his classroom and wearing women's clothes in the school building, albeit during off-hours when the building was closed to the public. ... He was discovered on two occasions cross-dressing in the school. After the first incident, he was met with sympathy by school authorities and directed to take special counselling, which he did. Some time later, however, the stolen property was discovered in the school, the situation became general knowledge in the ... district and obviously the Respondent was obligated by public pressure to deal with the question. Mr A. was first suspended and then dismissed. (Pidcocke et al., 2000, p.151.)

In the UK there have been recent reported incidents of teachers changing their sex and in some cases returning to their school with a different identity. For example:

'Catholic head backs sex change'. The headteacher of a Roman Catholic school is supporting a female teacher who is undergoing a sex change. Parents of children at the ... have been informed that technology teacher Mrs LA will be known as Mr SA from Monday. A letter to parents from headteacher JM said that assemblies have been arranged this week to help youngsters understand "the unusual circumstances". (TES 3 March 2000 p.8)

The names of the school and person concerned were reported in full in this short news item. (It is noteworthy that the empathetic response to this teacher occurred in a religious school.) Later in the same month, in the TES's question and answer page for school managers, an anonymous head asked for help. S/he wrote:

It has come to my attention as head that a member of staff is starting the process of a sex change. She has not told me of this, but pupils and colleagues are already noticing changes in her physical appearance and dress. What should I do? (TES, 24 March 2000 p.27)

More recently, the main headline on the front page of the TES read *'Sex-Change Teacher in Rights Fight'* (5 October 2001, p.1). The article, below a large picture of *'Natasha ... a transsexual teacher'*, described how she had just won almost £4000 in compensation after *'an East Sussex primary [school] accepted it had discriminated against her'* (p.1).

Although this section has dwelt on issues concerning teaching staff, other adults who have contact with pupils are also the responsibility of the head, in particular,

support staff (e.g. administrators, caretakers, classroom assistants, technicians, learning mentors, librarians, cooks, cleaners). All the scenarios described above can affect them too. Because of power and status issues some support staff will be more vulnerable to sexual harassment than other workers in the school. When the person being harassed belongs to a minority ethnic group, racial stereotypes compound the sexual ones and they are vulnerable to being targets of both sexual and racial discrimination.

In a profession like teaching, dealing with a perceived and/or potential scandal will not always bring out the most generous side of the community. The profession may feel it has to exonerate itself and distance itself from the scandal. Rather than supporting those involved, it may close ranks and band together to blame and exclude them.

Conclusion

Clearly our sexuality is part of our identity. Much less clear is how much of our sexual identity it is proper to reveal to our colleagues and our charges. It has become both a cliché and an understatement to say that we are living in uncertain times and school leaders (like leaders elsewhere) must operate in this context. With regard to the issues raised in this article, they are having to make decisions within a context of changing and changeable public perceptions.

Many would argue that individual sexual preferences in themselves are not of any concern to 'the authorities'. It is only when the behaviour arising from these actions impact on the institution that they become the business of the head. However, the same actions can be perceived very differently depending on the sexuality and circumstances of those concerned.

Attitudes towards what is considered 'proper' are different in different communities and they change over time, posing an ongoing dilemma for school leaders. When dealing with these issues, headteachers have to consider that attitudinal change, although widespread, does not necessarily mean there is a consensus, particularly amongst the stakeholders of their particular school. As well as considering their own personal beliefs and values, headteachers have to draw on the schools' contextual and strategic intelligences (MacGilchrist, Myers & Reed, 2004) to read and understand the values of the community within which they are operating and make an ethical decision based on the information gained. Making decisions about these issues may be easier in a community where values and goals are shared (assuming the head subscribes to these values). When this is not the case the difficulties can be increased.

Heads have to be mindful of publicity (and its consequences) as well as what is best for the individuals concerned and the school – now and in the future. Leading a school in a time of uncertainty is a complex proposition and one fraught with risks.

The way heads in the UK react to changed attitudes to sexuality and how they interpret these changes in their school is open to scrutiny and in some cases legal action. School leaders need to be confident and equipped to deal with these issues as and when they arise.

Kate Myers

The book *Teachers Behaving Badly?* ... addresses sexual relations that may occur between adults working in and connected to the school, and teacher/older pupil relations initiated by both parties. A range of real-life scenarios that school leaders have had to address are included. Problems are discussed and contributors including David James (GTC) Graham Clayton (NUT) and Jim O'Brien (Edinburgh University) offer solutions based on codes of conduct, the law and professional development.

Kate Myers. *Teachers Behaving Badly? Dilemmas for School Leaders*, Routledge, 0-415-32115-0.

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