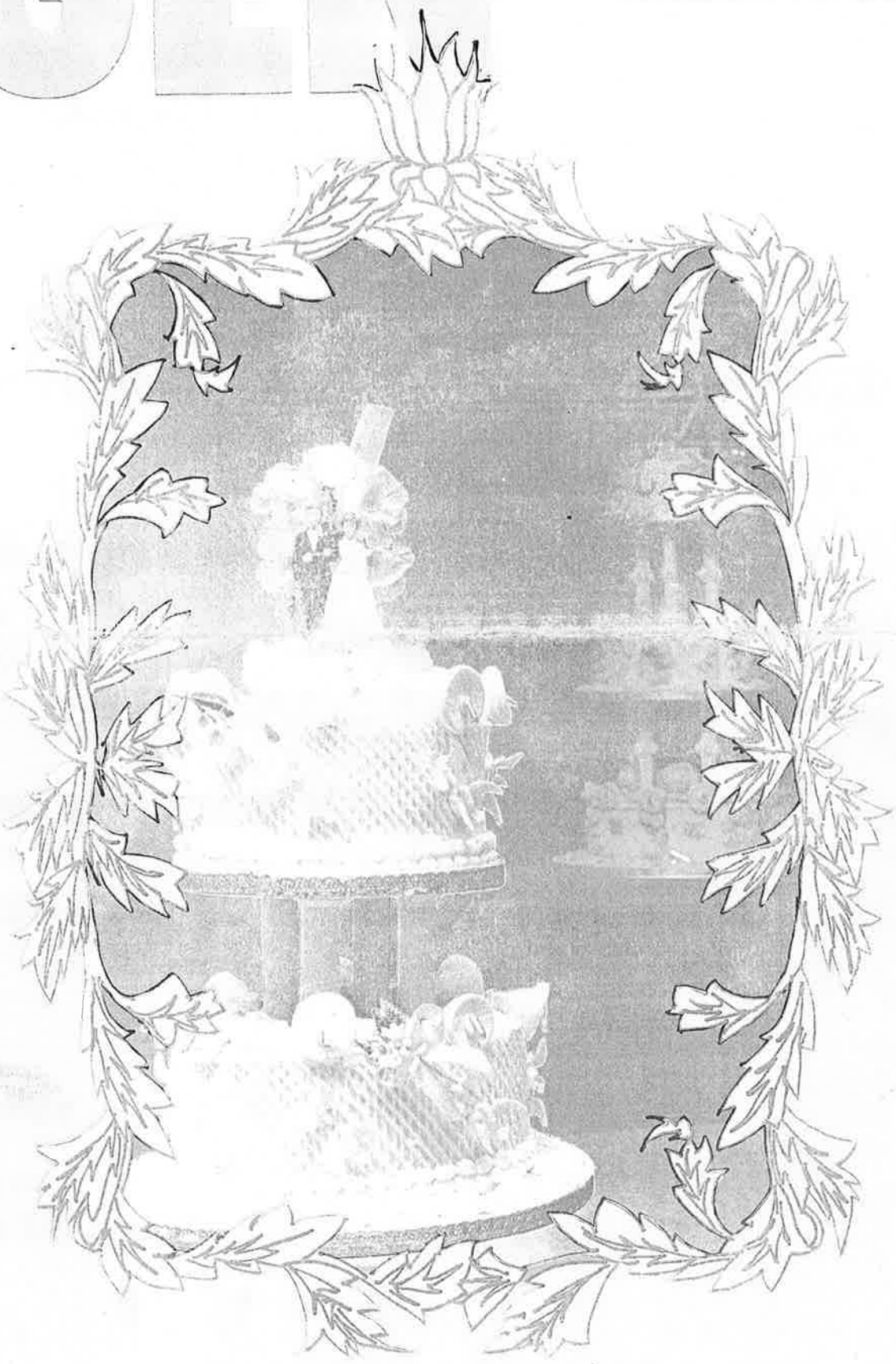


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Teacher's Journal
March 1987

Challenging Racism and Sexism in education



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Setting the Scene

My name is Malwa Rose. I am 38 years old. I am a Jewish lesbian. I am not 'out' at work and the reasons for this will become clearer as you read the article. I have worked in Jewish youth work for the last ten years. I am presently working in a small club where I am a part-time worker.



1. Why is it important for you to write this article?

To acknowledge that the oppression of gays and lesbians exists, that I have been and still affected by it in my life generally and in my work.

At work it is particularly important that I recognise that young Jewish gays and lesbians exist in the youth club and that I challenge both my heterosexual colleagues and young people who use the club. To write from a Jewish perspective will be both supportive for other Jewish readers and informative for non-Jews.

2. What is difficult about writing this article?

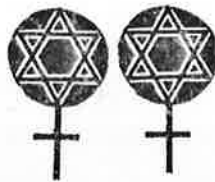
Recognising that I am constantly affected by heterosexist remarks and assumptions, plus facing up to the fact that I don't challenge, argue, interrupt these remarks enough especially when directed at me.

Exposing the gaps in my work generally and in particular around establishing a safe provision for young gay men and lesbians.

My main difficulty was finding a safe way to share my experiences and at the same time remaining anonymous. My anger and frustration around this made me feel like giving in on the one hand but at the same time gave me the strength to push through – however difficult.

3. What's exciting about this task?

Writing about my experiences will make them real and give them credibility. Other people, especially Jews, will feel able to share and identify with them so in some ways I will be helping to break the isolation which is a particularly strong feeling for both Jews and gays and lesbians.



Thinking about this issue has already been challenging and initiated more thinking about what I can do personally and what steps can be taken towards supporting young Jewish lesbians and gay men – an area which I had given no consideration up to now...

4. What is the Jewish perspective?

It is a false assumption that Judaism is any more heterosexist than other religions.

Our history has been one of severe persecution and massacre. Large numbers of Jews have died and great numbers have chosen to assimilate into another culture. It is hardly surprising that we are anxious about the long term survival of our people. These are very good reasons

why we are particularly concerned about perpetuating our people by marrying and procreating within the religion.

It's clear why there often appears to be more pressure on young Jewish people to be heterosexual and why the youth club is often seen, especially by parents, as the place where young Jewish men meet young Jewish women – and this is its only purpose.

The family unit is a central structure in Judaism. It's development as a safe, warm, loving niche has been essential to Jews as we have usually lived outside of the dominant culture. Many of the celebrations of our culture are based around the family unit. This again presents a further pull towards conforming to a heterosexual lifestyle. Choosing an alternative lifestyle presents Jews with facing rejection from society in general and their culture in particular.

5. In what ways is the oppression of Jews and gays and lesbians similar?

Jewish gay men face the double oppression of being both Jewish and gay. Jewish lesbians share these two oppressions and the added one of being a woman.

There are many similarities between the oppression of Jews and gay groups. It is unsafe for both to be completely visible for fear of attack.

In her book *Nice Jewish Girls* – a lesbian anthology – Evelyn Forton Beck says: 'Jewish invisibility is a symptom of antisemitism as surely as lesbian invisibility is a symptom of homophobia.' This is as true today as it has been in the past.

In Nazi Germany, Jews were singled out for being different (non aryan). At the same time gays were rounded up because of their differences.

The terror which exists because of each group's experiences (past and present) is compounded for those of us who are both Jewish *and* gay or lesbian.

Feelings of isolation are common to both Jews and gays. Jews often experience strong feelings of being different to and separated from other people because of differences in our culture and religion. Safety and trust is often only felt among Jews. Similarly gays and lesbians feel different and apart from mainstream society. Remaining isolated 'in the closet' is often chosen in preference to 'coming out'. Again, it is only among groups of lesbians and gays that a sense of safety is experienced.

Both groups have established many places where they can live, celebrate, and enjoy being together from the hostile and oppressive society. It is clear why both groups feel a need to seek such a refuge.

6. What have been any experiences of heterosexism at/in your work?

My personal experience at work has generally been that assumptions are made about my marital status. It is assumed that I am married and on hearing that I am not then I must be either divorced, or widowed.



I have also heard that some people find it 'peculiar' that I am single — especially at my age.

Because of my marital status I am expected to be available to work evenings and weekends as I obviously have no other important commitments.

In the youth club there is a general 'acceptance' and expectation of heterosexist programming and activities.

A large part of the programming for the older age groups — 13 plus — still includes and encourages discos. Activities at the club have taken the form of 'Mr & Mrs' Quizzes and 'Blind date'.

The general conversations in the club are loaded with heterosexist suggestions, assumptions and expectations both by the workers and young people.

Jokes are constantly being aimed at gays and lesbians with a new wave recently in response to the Aids scare.

7. What have you done/are doing to combat heterosexism?

On a personal level I insist that my name is preceded by Ms not Miss. I endeavour

to interrupt heterosexist remarks made by both young people and my colleagues by giving information rather than being angry.

I have challenged an activity which was based on finding a person of the opposite sex to give a Valentine message and present to. I suggested and encouraged people to choose a person they liked irrespective of their sex. I have talked to a group of girls who are interested in setting up a girls group. This might also provide a place where young lesbians feel safer to be.

It is also highly important to acknowledge that I challenge heterosexist assumptions just by being at the club. I am a strong model of a strong, alive, happy and fulfilled single Jewish worker. This in itself is contrary to how I am expected to be. Furthermore, I constantly question people's remarks so am an on-going reminder of a different viewpoint.

8. What are the next steps for you in your work?

It has become clearer to me how little I am doing to combat heterosexism in many areas of my work.

Already I have ensured that information about gay and lesbian organisations is more readily available at the club.

My immediate next steps will be to make certain that I never let a remark or incident, however small, go unchallenged. I intend to monitor programmes and activities more carefully and attempt to encourage positive programming in support of gays and lesbians. I hope to informally educate my immediate

colleagues to gain a greater awareness of heterosexism, by giving them correct information.

My long term goals are to initiate discussions on this issue with other professionals in Jewish youth work. From here, to organise a training programme to both raise awareness and develop strategies for action. And ultimately, both to begin to change the nature of the programmes which we offer young Jewish people and in the future establish a provision for young Jewish gays and lesbians.

In conclusion

Writing this article has been challenging and inspiring. Now I realise how crucial it is that this issue is not only written about but also talked about among Jewish youth workers. I am clearer about the difficulties we face as lesbian and gay workers, but also know that we must surmount these in order to serve all our young people equally.

I feel inspired to take further risks and initiate positive action — I look forward to this exciting challenge.



I would like to thank my two best friends — for their encouragement and support, for listening; for challenging me and so developing my thinking; for showing me so clearly how well they love me.

Lesbian Archive

The Lesbian Archive was set up in 1984 as a means of reclaiming our Lesbian history, celebrating our lesbian lives and ensuring that our stories are preserved for the future.

The Archive contains a collection of materials relating exclusively to lesbians, including books, periodicals, conference papers, photographs, press cuttings and oral histories as well as badges, posters and souvenirs. As a reference library and resource centre, it offers lesbians a reading/working space with photocopying and tape-recording facilities, an information service, conservation advice and safe storage.

The Archive has stringent security precautions to ensure the safety and confidentiality of materials house in it; accessibility of all materials is subject to the wishes of the giver, some personal collections not being available for inspection until 2050.

The overall success of the Archive depends on the active help and involvement of the lesbian community; there are no monies for purchasing materials and it relies on donations and loans as well as voluntary help.

If you have any lesbian material you would like to donate — oral, visual or printed items or any other memorabilia — please contact us. If you would be willing to regularly monitor a local or national newspaper or journal, the Archive would love to hear from you. If you could spare a few hours a week to come and help index books or classify press cuttings, please get in touch.

If you would like to come and use the existing collection, we would be pleased to see you. For more details, write or phone: The Lesbian Archive, BCM Box no.7005, London WC1N 3XX, tel: 01-405 6475.