A response to the School LGBTQ+ Diversity Since Section 28/Clause 2a event

February is LGBT history month and in Scotland, the focus is on that Clause 2a/Section 28 was repealed 20 years ago (https://www.lgbtyouth.org.uk/news/2019/announcing-the-theme-for-lgbt-history-month-2020/). There were three more years for it in England and Wales and the less said about Northern Ireland the better. I grew up under Section 28 and it was a confusing time. We had no internet, and no school or medical resources about homosexuality or bisexuality so all we had was the media and that was … varied.

Most media articles were hysterical in tone. Gay men were either said to be or implied to be paedophiles, gay women were often ignored or considered frigid or man-hating and bisexuals needed to pick a side. Where there was variation in representation it was HUGE and isolated. The famous Brookside lesbian kiss (https://www.stonewall.org.uk/our-work/campaigns/1994-same-sex-kiss-between-two-women-brookside-builds-first-kiss-between-two-men) was often reported for being “saucy” and framed through the male gaze. The gay kiss between Simon and Tony in EastEnders (https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/loud-proud-eastenders-gay-kiss-mark-homer_uk_5725ad16e4b0a1e971cb84f0) meanwhile should never have been shown before the watershed. Because sexuality was inherently sexual and not to be discussed.

For me growing up as bisexual in that world, and wanting to get married and have kids one day, “pick a side” meant picking
men because there was no way I could have those things with a
woman. I was still outspoken about gay rights but did not
think that could apply for me. Things have changed but Section
28 cast a long shadow over the lives of so many people and has
influenced the way children are taught, even today. There are
more resources outside of school but they still take courage
to find. It is still hard.

The Staff Pride Network held a schools event that highlighted
the parallels between Section 28 and the treatment of trans
rights and some attendees asked if there really was a
parallel. For me, there are some obvious ones. Media
representation of trans people has the same hysteria I
remember from my childhood and teen years. Trans women are
presented as sexually deviant, trans men are all but
forgotten, non-binary identities? Pick a side. A recent
Guardian Blind Dates column with a trans woman and a lesbian
led to people claiming the trans woman was somehow tricking
the lesbian. Thankfully she rebutted it in the strongest
possible terms (https://twitter.com/aigroe/status/1199431598929784838?s=20).

I know the internet it a resource now, but not everyone has it
in their homes. Imagine suspecting you are trans now in this
media environment? How much courage would it take to look it
up at school where people might see, particularly when
everything you see is so hysterical and claims you are such a
threat to the fabric of society (recalling Thatcher’s words as
she introduced Section 28)?

The fact that so many of the arguments and tropes that were
used against lesbian, gay and bisexual people are being used
against out trans siblings is something many of us can’t
ignore because we remember the impact those things had on our
own lives, and our own opportunities to be who we really are.

The shadow of Section 28 is still long, and the impact on trans lives is still harder. Research from LGBTYS (https://www.lgbtyouth.org.uk/media/1354/life-in-scotland-for-lgbt-young-people.pdf) shows that when asked if they had a mental health problem, 40% of LGBT young people and 66.7% of transgender young people said “yes”, while half (50%) of LGBT young people and 63% of transgender young people experienced suicidal thoughts or behaviours. 73% of LGBT young people, and 83% of transgender young people, who had experienced at least one mental health problem, had been bullied at school and this shows why the work of organisations like LGBTYS is so vital.

The parallels are real. We need to learn from the past, I know the 80s and 90s are back in fashion but prejudice, discrimination and bigotry never should be.

Siobhán