



GENDER AND SEXUALITY ISSUES IN OUR WORK CREATING ARTS FOR CHILDREN

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hosted by Action for Children's Arts
www.childrensarts.org.uk

PRESENTERS

Vicky Ireland MBE – Chair of Action for Children's Arts. Freelance director, writer, actress, presenter, Co-Artistic Director of A Thousand Cranes Theatre. Former Artistic Director of Polka Theatre Wimbledon.

Chris Jarvis – Trustee of Action for Children's Arts. Presenter on BBC Children's Television.

SPEAKERS

Amie Taylor – Editor of LGBTQ Arts. Author of The Big Book of LGBTQ+ Activities – promoting inclusion in primary education, published by Jessica Kingsley. Actor.

Provocation:

Amie: My background is in theatre – I trained at Dartington College of Arts and Theatre, in Community with Theatre Practices. I then started working with various theatre companies including Half Moon and London Bubble.

I came out in my mid-twenties and was interested to take my work in that direction. I worked for Diversity Role Models – an organisation that delivers anti-homophobic, transphobic and bi-phobic bullying workshops in schools. They are particularly focussed on language – approaching the school as a whole and trying to shift secondary school culture.

I then wanted to look at how we could address these things with younger children, as by secondary school this culture is already established. This is so being LGBTQ+ is never seen as other or different, just part of the landscape.

I started making shows for children with LGBTQ+ characters. My first show was *Once upon a City*. It was on at Omnibus, Arcola and then toured. The kids didn't care about the story featuring two princesses who were in a relationship. I worked alongside Jackson's Lane Theatre for Haringay's Got Pride. I then made another show called *The Diaries of a*

Miserable Unicorn. This was about identity and allowing people to identify how they want.

These shows were for children aged 3-8, planting the seeds of LGBTQ+ identities and including them in our stories. I wanted to get the plays published as stories, but was rejected because they are difficult to sell. However, one publisher (Jessica Kingsley) asked if I wanted to write 'The Big Book of LGBTQ+ Activities'. This was published inline with inclusive Sex and Relationship Education becoming a compulsory part of the curriculum in September 2020. It starts in reception and is age appropriate – so for example with younger kids it is focussed on having two mums or two dads.

Originally I said no to the book, but then after the protests in Birmingham I decided it could have a value. The book is broken into five stories, covering different types of relationships and identities. The idea is the teacher can read the story to the class, and then hand out work sheets – they don't have to do anything more. It is to support teachers who may not have anyone LGBTQ+ in their close circles, helping them know what the right language is etc.

LGBTQ+ representation is so important when we are working with young people. I didn't come out until I was 25 because I hadn't grown up with any role models: none of the books I read or films I watched included gay people – except with negative stereotypes or as outsiders. It's important the next generation has access to these role models.

At the moment there is a problem as many teachers don't know where to go to get their resources for inclusive sex education.

Working with young people and safeguarding with LGBTQ young people: if a young person comes out to you while you are working with them – **it is not a safeguarding issue**. There is sometimes a misunderstanding that it might be. It is only a safeguarding issue if you think they are at risk for some reason, for example at risk of being bullied, or a parent isn't responding well.

Gender: I am not trans myself but I work with a lot of trans and non-binary people and am interested in what that community is saying. If someone asks for certain pronouns to be used it is so important to respect that, and use those pronouns when talking about them as well as when talking to them. In terms of space and

accessibility – look at spaces in terms of gender. Gender neutral toilets (you could change signage temporarily) are important.

Non-binary: it is widely accepted nowadays that gender is a spectrum and everyone sits somewhere on that spectrum. Someone who identifies as non-binary may not sit at either end of that spectrum, but may place themselves more in the centre of that spectrum, or they may be gender fluid, which means they move around the spectrum, it can be different for everyone. They may use they/them pronouns. If you are working with teens it is always worth asking for their pronouns. This can be the step that makes someone feel welcome.

Questions

Q. When I was growing up, language didn't factor into the occasion as there was so much physical bullying from the teachers, and children were also awful to children who were LGBTQ+. It's a new world – how important would you say language is?

A. Incredibly important. All the work we did at Diversity Role Models was trying to break down things that were built into language. I try to use gender neutral language when addressing young

people, rather than ‘boys’, ‘girls’ - instead folks, comrades. As an adult, I frequently get asked if I have a husband and then I have to ‘come out’ all over again.

Q. What do you think about the de-medicalisation of these issues? How do we pull parents into this learning?

A. I think it is about usualising different gender identities and sexualities – accepting that they are out there. Personally I don’t see any dangers. Lots of people are very angry and concerned about the de-medicalisation, and allowing trans and non-binary people to self identify – however, I think it is a really important step for the trans community to be able to do this, and will make life a lot easier. Stonewall’s survey found that 83% of young trans people have experienced verbal abuse.

With parents, we just need a big shift. It’s going to be hard but I do hope that with government legislating that this has to be taught, hopefully that shift will be made. We just need to let young people know that there are LGBTQ+ people out there. Schools need to be very open with what is happening and include parents in the conversation. The situation in Birmingham was so fragile – we have to respect

religion, but we also have to understand the damage it will have on children's mental health if they don't learn about these communities. I think in Birmingham there was a lot of misinformation being spread around about sexualising children. Covid-19 has pushed these issues to the back of the queue.

Q. In terms of creating stories to take to primary schools, have you had problems with staff or parents?

A. I've had one problem once, with a parent removing their child from one of my shows. Generally feedback from teachers, parents and children is really positive.

Q. We all know schools are very difficult to get into – how are you building those partnerships to get through the door with this work?

A. Mine are often quite inside relationships as I work in a lot of schools anyway. Haringay's Got Pride got me into quite a lot of schools. I've never tried to get in touch with schools out of the blue – it is so hard to even get to the right person.

Q. I'm conscious that a key difference between my generation and the generation growing up now is they have laptops, tablets etc. and can watch whatever they manage to find on the Internet. Can you see the influence of that? Is it opening their eyes to the

spectrum of gender identities and sexual orientation? Do theatre makers need to tune into that to understand what young people have access to?

A. I lose track so fast of what technology they are using! I think the generation that are 13-18 now are much more aware of gender – although I can read everything, they are creating a new language around it. Please note this is not all children and not in all places. There is awareness though – I have worked with so many teenagers who are out. That wouldn't even have been possible when I was their age. It is so heartening to see, and so important we listen to them so we don't get out of touch. For us as creators, it is important to tune in if we are working with young people. I often do it by just chatting to them. It is really important to allow space for conversations to happen and to not shut things down we are scared of – I've seen that a fair amount in schools.

Q. Do you think it should be the government that reevaluates what is in the curriculum? If there was a misunderstanding or misinterpretation, maybe they should go back and be a little clearer?

A. The guidelines are a bit basic. We've gone from this education not being legislation, to being compulsory. It hasn't been considered what that means. Teachers haven't had to teach it before and

there is no support for them. It would really help them if things were easily available – easy resources.

Q. Has anyone compiled a list of these resources? Is that something we could do at ACA?

A. Stonewall has fantastic resources available, but I think it would be a really good idea for ACA to produce a balanced resource list. A lot of teachers know about it, but schools and teachers have discretion and the more we can help them, the better. Also suggest books they can have in their libraries.

Government guidance, with resource list:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/908013/Relationships_Education_Relationships_and_Sex_Education_RSE_and_Health_Education.pdf

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RECOMMENDATIONS

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1. Give students access to age-appropriate LGBTQ+ role models.
2. If a young person comes out to you while you are working with them, their disclosure is not a safeguarding issue unless you consider them to be at risk of verbal abuse from classmates / family members.
3. Always welcome people by asking them to share their pronouns.
4. Use the correct pronouns when talking about people, as well as when talking to them.
5. Consider using temporary signage if gender neutral toilets are not available in your working space.

6. Try and use gender neutral language when addressing groups. Rather than 'boys and girls', try saying 'folks'.
7. Schools should include parents in their plans for Sex and Relationship education.
8. Young people are creating new language around gender. It is important to listen.
9. Don't shut down conversations that scare you!

Please forward any useful materials (books, research) for the age range, 0-12 to Action for Children's Arts for compilation. Send to: mimi.doulton@childrensarts.org.uk