

20 Years of LGBT Issues in Schools - a history of almost criminal negligence! - Paul Patrick

It was in 1984 when Trenchard and Warren first produced their survey into the lives and experiences of lesbian and gay young people - "Something to Tell You". It made very dispiriting but unsurprising reading. What was worse is that it was almost uniformly ignored by all those working with young people except those of us already committed to the issues and we were few and far between and frequently viewed with suspicion by the majority. With such a response from the professionals it should be of little surprise that things have not improved much for young people who are lesbian, gay or bisexual, who think they might be, who are thought by others to be or who have lesbian, gay or bisexual friends or family. Transsexual young people, or those who think they might be, suffer even greater ignorance and almost complete invisibility.

The abuse and violence faced by these young people, robbed of any self-esteem by an education system that at best ignored their needs, has been clearly mapped, written up and then mostly ignored.

Because of this I offer a history lesson and yet another plea that these issues be taken seriously and incorporated into all aspects of education.

Let us begin with the current state of play.

Stonewall surveyed 4000 lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals about their experiences of homophobic violence, harassment and verbal abuse.
Of respondents aged under 18: -
48% had experienced violence
61% had been harassed
90% had been called names because of their sexuality
50% of violent attacks involved fellow students
40% took place at school
24% of all respondents aged under 18 had been attacked by fellow students
79% had been had called names by fellow students.

Did you know how dangerous schools are for our young people? Many teachers do, but feel unable to do anything about it!

The Terrence Higgins' Trust and Stonewall survey of the staff of more than 300 schools in England and Wales found:
82% were aware of verbal homophobic bullying in their school;
99% had an anti bullying policy in school;
However only 6% recognised homophobic bullying within their policy.

Nor was the vulnerability of these young people unknown to the other young people around them.

In the Stonewall document "Profiles of Prejudice" produced in 2003 young people were asked which minority groups they felt were most vulnerable to prejudice and discrimination. They were very clear:
gay and lesbian people 55%
people from ethnic minorities 47%
refugees/asylum 44%
people who overweight or obese 32%
physically disabled 22%
travellers/gypsies 20%.

In case you conclude that that was all some time ago and things must have improved since then, research done by Hazel Wallace for the Metro Centre in 2005 - "Time To Think" - see www.timetothinkresearch.co.uk - confirms all the above figures as accurate, except for one. Her research suggests that the incidence of homophobic bullying has **doubled** since that original report came out in 1984!

One may wonder how that could be when there has been such an increase in the visibility of lesbians and gay men, when we have more rights and greater legal status, when our lives, experiences and achievements are far more in the public domain.

The answer is simple. All the above is true except within our schools, where LGBT lives and achievements are routinely censored from the school curriculum, where LGBT staff are encouraged to keep their identities a secret, where any discussion of these issues takes place in the playground and not the classroom, where young people with LGBT family and friends see none of that experience replicated within the school, where the needs of LGBT students, those that are questioning their sexuality or gender identity, those that have LGBT family and friends and those that are considered LGBT by others are frequently ignored.

There is no doubt that homophobic bullying is a major component of anti social behaviour in schools today. The use of sexist and homophobic terms still forms a large part of playground banter, with the use of the word "gay" now commonly used to mean anything dysfunctional or "naff". For all children, the blanking or ignoring of such language by staff is seen as collusion, denies equal opportunities to everyone and such collusion sends a clear message that anyone can be picked on at any time.

This abuse clearly affects the ability to enjoy school life and to achieve - "Fear inhibited participation", says one young woman "Fear inhibited concentration. Fear kept me away from the tuck shop queue. Fear kept me away from the coffee machine. Fear sometimes meant avoiding the lunch hall: going without a meal. When you have experienced other girls spitting at your plate and splattering you with a jug of water you tend to plan each step with great vigilance."

"Fear made me withdrawn, isolation was safer. That said, isolation made the bullying worse. Isolated, I was so very much an easy target. Gangs of girls made life hell along badly supervised corridors, in PE changing rooms. School was a nightmare."

"It is my belief that the perpetual abuse suffered can result in an inability to form close or loving relationships and can initiate an involvement with self-destructive lifestyles, low self esteem, as well as the formation of many other dysfunctional behaviour patterns. That has been the case with me."

A young man adds, "School was a mentally and emotionally unhealthy and unsafe place for boys such as myself. Homophobia was a knife to the psyche. Homophobia was a deep cut, deep cut each day. Homophobia put me at daily physical risk, 24/7, constant 'low-level' injury. Gay boys like me didn't fit in, that was made clear through the negligence, the avoidance of dealing with the anti-gay behaviour, which so many experienced. We were virtually abandoned.

"Tortured? Most certainly. The problem was compounded when derogatory terms about homosexuality were used in everyday language within the school and that use was ignored by staff. When problems such as these arose, staff should have had sufficient guidance on the interpretation of school values and what constitutes unacceptable language and behaviour. Gay boys like me would be called 'poof',

'pansy', 'bumboy', 'pervert', 'dirty fuckin' queer' ... and nothing would happen. Nothing, ever!"

Nor does this abuse from pupils and ignorance from staff confine itself to the Secondary School. The very recent research done by Dr Elizabeth Anderson of Sunderland University makes it very clear that homophobia and the policing of children's gender identity is alive and well in our primary and even pre-school classrooms and playgrounds.

The original Lesbian and Gay Teenage project conducted a piece of research, which found that one in five of lesbian and gay teenagers had attempted suicide. This statistic has been confirmed several times by the Samaritans and most recently by research published in 2006 by **Childline** and the **NSPCC**. Figures for outside the major conurbations are even worse, with a survey of young lesbians in Calderdale concluding that 70% had attempted suicide.

Attempted suicide is the most severe response, but is only the tip of the iceberg. Other mechanisms are often adopted to block the effects of the pain such as:-

- alcohol and drug misuse;
- truancy that will occur as students seek to escape from the persecution;
- students will not be able to work effectively in such an environment so academic standards will drop;
- due to low self-esteem and anxiety some young people develop eating disorders, may self harm and suffer from other mental and physical problems.

Often the problems faced by these young people in school are compounded by their lives at home. Across all the surveys 1 in 5 suffered physical abuse from a family member in their own home because of their sexuality. Many found it necessary to leave that home for the dangers of the streets and homelessness.

Frequently teachers and other workers in education refuse to see the problem or attempt to ignore it hoping it will go away or see the situation as one they cannot or will not deal with. The fear generated by Section 28, which, by the way, never applied to schools, lives on in many places, with many unaware that the pernicious section has been repealed.

Parents are frequently cited as objecting to this work, when as long ago as 1994 a Health Education Authority study of 1,462 parents found that 94% thought schools should play a role in teaching pupils about sexuality, 56% about sexual orientation and 80% about HIV.

In their "**Profiles of Prejudice**" 2003 Stonewall and Mori asked families: "How comfortable or uncomfortable would you feel if your child's teacher or the teacher of a close relative, were gay or lesbian (by number of children in the household.)?"

No children in the household

22% not comfortable

21% no opinion

57% comfortable

Children in the household

17% not comfortable

10% no opinion

73% comfortable.

Yet LGBT teachers, essential role models in our schools, are frequently pressured into remaining invisible by reference to supposed parental hostility.

I know you will say that things have improved, that Government guidelines have addressed the issues and come out with clear advice. And you would be correct.^{1 2 3 4}

It would be impossible to read this guidance and law without realising that it is now incumbent on schools to:

1. Challenge the stigmatisation of lesbian and gay families in lessons about families, marriage and stable relationships
2. Give positive information on lesbians, gays and bisexuals to enable pupils to challenge derogatory stereotypes and prejudice.
3. Include lesbian, gay and bi sexuality in lessons on sex education
4. Challenge all forms of homophobic bullying.

Despite this excellent advice and support, we have yet to see noticeable change in the classrooms, corridors and playgrounds of our schools.

Even if all the above were acted upon it would remain only a sticking plaster on an infected wound. Including LGBT issues in sex education alone sees sexuality and gender identity as a sexual matter, rather than one of human identity, responsibilities and rights. To deal only with LGBT issues in response to homo/transphobic bullying is to cast us as victims, only worthy of recognition in our suffering - pretty much what happened when LGB issues were given permission to be addressed in HIV/AIDS education.

Further this same DfES that advised so readily on homophobic bullying managed to ignore the needs of LGBT young people in their landmark documents "**Every Child Matters**" and "**Youth Matters**". Even the Steer report, "**Learning behaviour**" issued in October 2005 recommended "**3.1.6: the DfES should issue further advice on tackling bullying motivated by prejudice. This includes homophobia, racism and persecution in all its various manifestations.**"

There has been no research and no guidelines produced for the tackling of transphobia and the effect that it has on young people who are trans or think that they might be. It takes no great leap of the imagination however to understand the very precarious position they must be in. It is time that educators broke the silence on the lives and experiences of trans people and created an education system that accepted and supported their existence. (See end of Chapter.)

However all of the above only scratches the surface. For this work to progress properly there needs to be a fundamental change in the culture and content of our education system.

Schools OUT, the 32-year-old national LGBT equality in education organisation, has this to say in their **Mission Statement**⁵:

"Equality does not come through legislation and regulation alone. It also requires a change of culture - the culture of our society and, more particularly, the culture of our schools and colleges. Schools OUT seeks to address issues of equality through both the legislative/regulative and cultural routes as they mutually reinforce each other."

¹ DfEE Circular on Social Inclusion: Pupil Support (10/99)

² DfEE Sex and Relationship Guidance, July 2000.

³ Local Government Act 2000 Section 104 that amended the infamous Section 28.

⁴ DfES document Don't Suffer in Silence. 2003.

⁵ See www.schools-out.org.uk

They call for proper training for all staff and teachers in training, the development of appropriate curricula to reflect the lives and meet the needs of all out students and an inspection process that sees the evaluation of the above as central to its work.

This is the minimum needed if we are to transform our schools into safe places for all and provide an education system attuned to everyone's needs.

Yet we cannot just sit around and wait for that wish list to be enacted. If we are to move forward on these issues and improve and lives, experiences and education of all our children and honour the experiences of all our parents and staff, we must begin now wherever we are and make what difference we can. Below is a guide to what can be done - some you may do already, some may take some working towards, but we can all progress these issues if we wish and have a responsibility to do so.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Numbers in brackets () refer to the "How To" section below.

Schools need to:

- Have clear anti bullying policies that include homo/transphobic bullying. (1)
- Give training to all staff to enable them to have the skills, confidence and techniques to recognise homo/transphobic bullying and tackle it effectively. (2)
- Include lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans issues right across the curriculum in English, history, science etc. (3&5)
- Insure the Equal Opportunity Policy includes lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people. (4)
- Insure all your policies and practices meet the needs of your lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans students and staff and parents. (4, 5, 6, 7, 8)
- Welcome and support your lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans staff. (3, 4, 5,6, 7,8, 9, 10, 12, 11, 12, 14, 16)
- Insure your covert culture is welcoming to all lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people. (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16)
- Insure that lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans parents and their children are welcomed and supported. (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 15, 19)

Staff Need:

- Full training in all these issues:
how to recognise homo/transphobia,
how to deal effectively with it,
how to integrate lesbians, gay, bisexual and trans people throughout the overt and covert curriculum; (1, 2, 5, 14, 19)*
- Knowledge of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans support groups; (7)
- Knowledge that their authority and school and or work place will fully support them if they 'come out'. (7, 8 16)

Young People Need:

- A safe, comfortable and supportive environment; (1 - 20)
- Clear guidelines on acceptable behaviour; (1, 13, 14)
- Someone to listen & take their concerns seriously; (15)

- Access to support groups outside school; (10,15)
- Appropriate models of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people, past and present; (3)
- Access to information leaflets and posters about lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans issues; (3, 5,10, 12, 19)

HOW DO YOU DO THIS?

1. Define and include 'homo/transphobic bullying' in the bullying policy.
2. Provide training on recognising and dealing effectively with homo/transphobic abuse and bullying to be made available to all staff. (Note that in research, it was found that much of the abuse and bullying took place in situations where teachers are not usually present.)
3. Provide positive images of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people along-side those of other individuals and community groups, acknowledging the sexuality of famous and successful lesbians, gay and bisexual people and the gender identities of others both past and present. The work needs to be placed in a wider context where lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and trans people are seen as citizens and participants in a wide range of activities both past and present. This should happen in the same way as ensuring work presented to pupils includes positive images of black, minority ethnic people, women and people with disabilities, etc.
4. Revisit all policies and practices, especially the equal opportunity policy, to see if lesbians, gay, bisexual and trans people are included and catered for.
5. Develop the curriculum to include lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans experience, both in celebration and in looking at issues of equality and oppression.
6. Examples are:
inclusion of oppression of gays and lesbians when looking at the Holocaust in history; inclusion of a range of sexualities and gender identities in sex education; exploring issue based drama and utilising many novels and poems dealing with the subject in English, looking at the medical model of a transgendered person in science.
7. Regularly review the covert culture, i.e., language and images used in all school communications be they written or spoken, choice of uniform, names of forms, houses etc. to reflect an anti-heterosexist culture.
8. Schools and Local Authorities should enable the setting up of interest groups for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people so they can support each other and make recommendations.
9. Local Authorities to review their policies and practices so that they support and enable staff to 'come out' if they so wish.
10. Develop models of good practice and support and apply them to particular situations, be they classroom, corridor, canteen, youth club, career guidance, counselling room, hospital etc.
11. Regularly update advertising such as posters for appropriate local lesbian, gay and bisexual clubs and events. Continuously display the lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans switchboard numbers, both local and national.
12. Fast and effective removal of offensive graffiti.
13. School assemblies need to reflect lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans anniversaries like Stonewall and LGBT History Month UK (February) as well as birthdays of famous lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people.
14. Behaviour guidelines and structures regularly debated and agreed and owned by students, in order to help students and staff to implement them, i.e., election of student safety officers.
15. The encouragement of a culture that engenders effective learning and the exploration of what students and staff need from each other to learn.
16. A designated person who young people know they can talk to about these issues in confidence. (This is in addition to their form/year tutor, not instead of.)

17. Design school social events and invitations so that they are welcoming to all partners of staff and parents.
18. Support young lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people who wish to come out, and help them link up with others.
19. Find lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans affirmative therapists and counsellors for those young people who would like help coming to terms with their sexuality/gender identity.
20. Develop the sex education curriculum so that it does not only cover reproduction and disease. Sex needs to be taught in a way that young people can relate to. It is vital that a range of sexual orientations and gender identities are discussed in a positive manner.
21. In everything you say, do or write, know that everyone is unique and do not assume that everyone is heterosexual or is comfortable in their birth gender. Challenge gender stereotypes and seek not to reinforce them!

Useful websites for the progression of equality work to support young trans people.

The Beaumont Society - UK based transgender support group. www.beaumontsociety.org.uk

Gender Identity Research and Education Society - The aim of this website is to inform a wide public of the issues surrounding gender identity and transsexualism. It is also a resource for gender dysphoric people and their families; the medical and other professionals that provide their care, including clinicians and the police; Health Authorities; Members of Parliament and other policy makers; employers; the media. www.gires.org.uk

The Gender Trust - The Gender Trust specifically helps adults who are Transsexual, Gender Dysphoric or Transgender i.e. those who seek to adjust their lives to live as women or men, or to come to terms with their situation despite their genetic background. There are a number services that we can supply: information about trained counsellors, psychologists and psychotherapists; advice on initiating the proper referral procedure to a choice of psychiatrists; help for those who are Intersex, and try to provide care for partners and families of all these individuals; guidance and information for those who may encounter gender issues in the course of their work, including employers, social workers, welfare workers, the media and the medical profession. www.gendertrust.org.uk

Mermaids - Mermaids is a support group for gender variant children and teenagers. Our aims are simple: We aim to support children and teenagers up to age 19, who are trying to cope with gender identity issues. In support of this one aim, we also intend to: offer support to parents, families, carers, and others; raise awareness about gender issues amongst professionals (e.g. teachers, doctors, social services, etc.) and the general public; campaign for the recognition of this issue and the increase in professional services. www.mermaids.freeuk.com/

Press for Change - This site aims to be a newspaper, library and resource centre rolled into one. Nowhere else in the world will you find such a comprehensive collection of information about the trans rights campaign, and details about the legal, medical, political and social issues surrounding the people it represents. If you're a trans person, we aim to raise your consciousness. If you're a researcher or a journalist we want you to have everything you could possibly want to report us accurately and fairly. If you're a campaigner already, we want to provide you with the very best resources. And if you're not, we'd like to show you what an astonishing challenge we face. www.pfc.org.uk/