

Schools OUT and the struggle for LGBT equality in education in Britain.

It was a sunny day in May 1974 when a group of us decided that we needed to form what we then called the Gay Teachers' Group. In retrospect this was a rather brave decision as, at that time, teachers discovered to be lesbian or gay were routinely removed from their post. This, I am pleased to say was news to me, as, by this time I was already out to at least half my colleagues, my head and the Governing Body - as I was teacher governor. No-one seemed particularly surprised or particularly bothered.

It was because of this somewhat privileged position that it was decided that I would become this newly created group's secretary; its public face so to speak. I had only to break it to my head and then wait for the pupils to discover. My head was very supportive but did express some concern as to how the local authority might react when they discovered my new role.

This did not take long in coming. We had issued a press release to announce the formation of our new group and requests for interviews began to come in. I chose the newspaper that I most trusted and within a week the story had been picked up by, amongst others, the newspaper local to the school in which I taught. The press coverage was surprisingly positive but I was well and truly out!

The local authority did make moves to fire me but the school stood firm, with eventual support from both parents and pupils, and I suddenly became the first openly gay teacher in Britain to retain his job!

At this point none of the Unions were particularly sympathetic and so we decided that there would be the best place to start. Almost all of us were members of the largest of the teaching unions, the National Union of Teachers, and most were already active within it. Moving the Union was quite a lengthy task but many heterosexual colleagues supported us and the change we had been seeking eventually came about. With the major teaching Union now actively supporting their lesbian and gay members it wasn't long before the sackings on grounds of homosexuality stopped. That of course did not prevent schools and local authorities putting pressure on people to remain in the closet in all sorts of ways; something that continues to this day and accounts for the very small number of openly lesbian and gay teachers currently employed in the British education system.

However it did mean that the focus for our activism could be somewhat redirected.

We changed our name to Lesbian & Gay Workers in Education. This signified that we had been made aware that our agenda up to that point had been a very male one and that the needs of lesbian teachers, where they differed, had been neither properly understood nor addressed and also that there were other staff members in our schools than teachers. At this point our focus remained firmly on the needs of adult staff and included parents and students only in so far as they impacted upon our needs.

This began to change. It was clear that we could not exist in a system that did not properly acknowledge that existence, not only in its employment policies, but in all other aspects of school life including, most controversially, then and now, the curriculum.

In 1983 the Greater London Council published a piece of research on the lives and experiences of young lesbians and gay men in the capital - "Something to Tell You" by Trenchard & Warren - and for the first time we were confronted with the horrific reality that our young people faced within our schools. Our focus changed again to accept that all these issues were indivisible - a school that did not support its lesbian and gay staff was not likely to support such pupils or parents, was

unlikely to take homophobic bullying seriously, and was certainly not going to include the lives and achievements of lesbian and gay people within the curriculum. It wasn't enough to attempt to win one battle, for such a victory without the whole package would at best be partial and at worst downright dangerous for those prepared to put themselves on the line.

With the flourish of another name change the philosophy of what then became Schools OUT was being forged!

Again we sought first to convince the unions of our approach. This time we found ourselves knocking on a door if not entirely open then at least some ways ajar.

It was about this time that the notorious Section 28 was voted into law. This was a superb example of how little legislation can affect the law - the Section never applied to schools, its language was nonsensical and it was never in the entire time of its existence tested in a court - but how much it can effect the climate and culture that it is introduced into - it legitimised homophobia, demonised those fighting against it, made teachers fearful and confused and coerced schools into ignoring the legitimate needs of their pupils.

It was this effect that blighted work on LGBT equality in our schools for years and which continues to feed the reluctance that affects the development of LGBT equality in education, not only by local and national politicians, but by some of the teaching unions and even LGBT organisations themselves.

It was at this point that we added the "T" to our description of who we were. It was a cosmetic decision I will be the first to admit. We were no longer lesbian, gay and bisexual but lesbian, gay bisexual and trans. It took some time before our politics caught up with our logo, but with the tireless support of trans colleagues and campaigners, some of whom now work closely with us, we became able to begin to articulate the needs to trans teachers, parents and young people in our schools. We remain the only national organisation to insist on this inclusivity in all our dealings and it does set us apart. Yet I return to my earlier point about the impossibility of achieving these aims piecemeal.

This refusal to take the issues seriously shows itself in the almost universal decision to reduce this to "tackling homophobic bullying", which is the only part of this work that appears to be invested with any legitimacy whatsoever.

There is much wrong with this approach and Schools OUT, almost alone, spends most of its time arguing what that may be!

To begin!

Reducing these issues to "tackling homophobic bullying" entrenches LGBT people as victims. Victimhood appears to be the only role that the establishment and its friends are willing for us to adopt and certainly the only one they are prepared to recognise. This is not a new phenomenon. When Section 28 became law it exempted one area of the curriculum from its purview - AIDS education. It was perfectly acceptable to discuss lesbian and gay sexuality if it was in the context of a deadly disease. Now it is legitimate to discuss lesbian, gay or bi sexuality or gender identity if it is in the context of bullying. Neither leave room for a positive approach to who we are and both reinforce the sexual or "deviant" aspects of our presumed lives. Yet not only is this the given route of the Department for Children, Schools and Families but it is so prevalent that it is echoed by most LGBT groups working in the field. That it is reductionist, stereotyping, insulting and disempowering appears not to have been noticed.

Current Government strategy for the development of education is based upon the document "Every Child Matters" - which attempts to argue just what the title says! However because the document does not recognise difference, diversity or unequal social status and therefore differential access to education of different groups and individual children it is no more than a series of liberal platitudes with nary a solution in sight. Like an election manifesto it promises much and then does not deliver.

Nor is the work that we are proposing either rocket science or particularly costly. Much could be achieved with a few bold and inexpensive steps.

1. The Department for Children, Schools and Families could publicly value their lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans staff and encourage them to be open about who they are within the school and thereby become some of those positive role models that are so badly needed. Currently schools are as unwelcoming to LGBT staff as they are to pupils and parents and whilst we are now protected by employment legislation, there remain many ways to put pressure on staff to deny who they really are. Public support from the DCSF could begin the cultural change that would reverse all that.
2. Return LGBT lives and achievements to all relevant aspects of the school curriculum. Why is it that I know that Lord Nelson was a heterosexual adulterer but not that Florence Nightingale was a lesbian? How is it possible to teach many of Shakespeare's plays or any of his sonnets without discussion of his sexuality? Why should we not know that Alan Turing, war hero and founder of the modern computer, was hounded to death by the British establishment because he was homosexual? Or that Jackie Kay is not only a black woman who was adopted as a child but is also a lesbian mother. Why should the history of LGBT people's struggle for civil rights not be taught alongside the history of the Black Civil Rights Movement? Why should primary school children who perceive themselves to be different, who come from families with LGBT members, not see themselves and their families replicated in their school curriculum? Our lives and achievements are routinely censored from the curriculum's content and that needs to stop.
3. Teacher training at all levels and in all forms should include how to positively explore and celebrate human diversity and to educate for social cohesion. It should empower staff to intervene when confusion, fear, prejudice and stereotyping raise their heads as they will and encourage them to act affirmatively then work towards long-term educational solutions.
4. All this work should affirm the diversity of the LGBT communities. We come from all walks of life, from all cultures and ethnicities, are differently abled and hold a wide range of beliefs and attitudes. We should not be reduced to a single image or identity.
5. Incidents of homophobia should be recorded monitored in the same way that racist incidents have to be by law.
6. All this should be an active and definitive part of the school inspection structure, which would at one move mainstream all these issues.
7. Work to analyse and develop understandings of trans issues so that they can take an equal place in the development of this work.

Are there any signs that this might happen?

Certainly not enough for any of us to relax, but there have been some positive moves.

The recent advice on (what else) homophobic bullying from the DCSF is by far the most positive and detailed to date. (Schools OUT's response to it can be read on the Schools OUT Blog - www.schools-out.org.uk). It includes references to an

integrated curriculum and the positive role to be played by openly LGBT staff within a school. It is detailed clear and concise. Yet it remains only guidance. Anti-racist work in schools is mandatory and a part of the inspection process, as it should be. By refusing to give equal status to this work they are saying to teachers and schools, already confused and frightened by Section 28 and exhausted by one new initiative after another, that this work is not as important and that there will be no official consequences for ignoring it. The DCSF were also so proud of this guidance to release it on a rainy Friday afternoon to almost no press attention. The DCSF may be unwilling to work towards lesbian, gay and bisexual equality, but that is nothing to their aversion to dealing with the needs of trans people within the education system nor the challenging of the ignorance and stereotyping that surrounds trans people's lives.

It is true that Britain now has some excellent legislation to support LGBT people in living their lives more honestly and more openly. That can only be a good thing. Our schools however, where hearts and minds are moulded and developed, remain reluctant to play their part in making our society and happier and healthier place for all, particularly where LGBT people are concerned.

There are also some great initiatives working for change. Schools OUT set up LGBT History Month UK, which takes place every February to celebrate the lives and achievements of LG BT people past and present. The website - www.lgbthistorymonth.org.uk - contains a rapidly growing archive, a Blog that changes daily, a forum where you can raise and debate LGBT issues as they affect you, lesson and assembly suggestions for schools and colleges, a calendar of events for LGBT History Month - last year we had over 800 - and a wide range of other issues, information and images. Please check it out.

The "No Outsiders" project based at Sunderland University seeks to work with primary school teachers to include books with LGBT themes into the primary reading curriculum and to get all teachers to see that homophobia and gender stereotyping are taught to children from the day that they are born and the sooner there is positive intervention the better. The No Outsiders project can be contacted at www.nooutsiders.sunderland.ac.uk .

Stonewall has set up the very successful "Education for All" a coalition of organisations working for change around LGB issues in education of which Schools OUT is a proud member. www.stonewall.org.uk/education_for_all.

Trans organisations are beginning to join the fray from Press for Change, www.pfc.org.uk and the organisation for trans children, young people and their families, Mermaids, www.mermaids.freeuk.com.

It is undoubtedly true that issues of sexual orientation and gender identity are debated daily within our schools, but that debate occurs in the playground and the corridors, where prejudice and stereotyping run free and not within the curriculum. Until that happens homophobia will remain endemic within our schools and young LGBT people will continue to be five times more likely to attempt and commit suicide than their heterosexual counterparts and whilst that is the case Schools OUT will be there to continue to work for equality for all.

You can find out more about the work of Schools OUT at www.schools-out.org.uk, where you can become a member, subscribe to our Blog or just catch up on the latest news relating to LGBT issues in education. The site changes daily so please keep an eye on it and comment yourselves on the issues raised though the Schools OUT Blog.

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