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Homophobia and Heteronormativity in the School Environment: An Irish Case Study

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Abstract

This research explores homophobic attitudes and the extent of heteronormativity in a typical Irish secondary school. The school environment was found to be both heterosexist and homophobic, with verbal name-calling presenting as a chronic problem. The views expressed by the teachers appeared to be rooted in the belief that to be heterosexual was 'the norm', and anything outside of that was 'abnormal' or wrong. The findings are based on a series of semi-structured interviews with school staff, a local LGB youth worker, and a past pupil who identifies as gay.

Keywords: LGB, homophobia, heteronormativity, bullying

Introduction

Homophobia is the irrational fear or persecution of people who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB). Relatively little research has been done concerning if, and how, homophobia is being addressed in Irish secondary schools. What little is available shows us that although homophobia and homophobic bullying are undoubtedly present in our schools, they are being dealt with ineffectively. The battle against homophobia in schools can be understood in a context of a heterosexist environment which often renders LGB children invisible.

The educators' role is imperative in positively affecting the social construction of LGB in the minds of young students (Sears, 1987). The attitudes and perceptions of teachers shape the way schools are run, what topics are addressed in class, the anti-bullying charter, and the disciplinary measures employed. Teachers, as influential figures in schools, are key players in mobilising change. This study focuses on their attitudes and perceptions towards the young LGB in our society, in the hope of building a more inclusive school environment. It seeks to explore homophobic attitudes and the extent of heteronormativity and homophobic bullying in the school environment. While explorations in the academic context are becoming more frequent in recent years (O'Higgins-Norman, 2008; Minton et. al, 2008; Norman, 2010), a gap still exists in educational discourse. Dialogue concerning LGB issues at school has been missing from policy and practice. This research serves to open up discussion and address these issues.

Conceptualised Heteronormativity and Homophobic Bullying

Heteronormativity can be understood as 'the view that institutionalised heterosexuality constitutes the standard for the legitimate and prescriptive sociosexual arrangements' (Ingraham, 1994 cited in Letts, 1999, p.98). It is the daily practice where LGB students are inadvertently discriminated against by the presumption that everyone is heterosexual; the heteronormative ethos which underpins the school. While they may not be directly targeted, LGB students/staff are forced to operate in an environment which condones the use of anti-gay slurs, and does not actively support gay and lesbian life. Letts (1999) notes how heteronormative discourses have a 'silencing' effect on any LGB students who may question the legitimacy of heterosexuality as the truth or the norm, and they can often become invisible in school (Savin-Williams, 1990; Lynch and Lodge, 2002; Mayock et. al, 2009). LGB children are not afforded the same protection given to their heterosexual peers, and can be treated as irrelevant in a heterosexist environment (Weidler, 2011).

There can be a distinction made between daily cultural practices of a heteronormative environment, and actual expressions of pointed homophobic bullying. Explicit homophobia is the direct persecution of LGB (actual or presumed) students (Epstein and Johnson, 1994, p.198). The concepts of both heteronormativity and explicit homophobia are key tools when exploring a school's environment, and are referenced as fundamental theories throughout this research.

Being LGB in School, Homophobia and Homophobic Bullying

A hostile school environment means LGB children can be considered 'at risk' of bullying, and are more prone to harassment than their heterosexual peers (Cowie and Jennifer, 2008; Warwick, 2001). The experience of homosexual students often involves harassment, diminished self-esteem, early school leaving, fear, and even suicide (GLEN/Nexus, 2000). Consequently, LGB youth are particularly vulnerable to mental health problems (Minton et. al, 2006; Mayock et. al. 2009), and are at a high risk of attempting taking their own lives (Minton et al., 2006).

Although it has been found that a large percentage of teachers are aware of such bullying, it is also commonly ignored, or dealt with ineffectively (Norman et. al, 2006; Minton et. al, 2006). In some cases, teachers themselves were found to be the perpetrators (Buston and Harte, 2001). The issue of homophobic bullying is not tackled explicitly in schools anti-bullying policies (Norman, 2004; 2010), suggesting that this is not being taken seriously. An Irish study showed that although 93% of teachers said they had an anti-bullying policy, 90% of these teachers reported that their school's anti-bullying policy did not include any reference to lesbian- and gay-related bullying (Norman, 2004).

Research findings suggest that homophobic slurs and the use of derogatory offensive homophobic language are widespread in Irish secondary schools (O'Moore and Minton, 2004; Norman, 2004; 2010; Norman, Galvin, McNamara, 2006), with use of LGB slurs, such as 'faggot', 'dyke', and 'queer', a regular occurrence (Norman, 2010). Research in Ireland by Minton et al. (2006) on LGB young people found over one third of respondents encountered verbal abuse based on their sexuality on a daily or weekly basis. Indirect verbal abuse such as spreading rumours/lies was experienced by 25% of participants. However, homophobic slurs often go undocumented as Minton et al (2006) found that in reality, 30% of those who had been bullied did not tell anyone.

Homophobia against LBG children is not limited to their schools. However, this is where they spend the majority of their time, and much of the harassment is reported to have occurred during school hours on school property (Norman, 2004; Mayock et. al,

2009). It can be seen that homophobic bullying can have devastating effects, and as pointed out by Norman et al (2006), it is not simply another type of bullying. Homophobic bullying in school is linked to wider society's perception of LGB people, and the prevalence of heteronormativity in any given community.

Methodology

This research was undertaken as a case study of a rural mixed-gender secondary school. It represents a typical rural school, and is average in size, outskirts-of-town location, mixed-gender make up, and Catholic ethos of most secondary schools outside of urban areas in Ireland . The study used in-depth interviews to analyse the attitudes and perceptions of the teachers in that school regarding homophobia and heterosexism. To gain a rich understanding of the environment at the school, interviews were conducted with the Principal, the Physical Education (PE) teacher, and the Social, Personal, Health, Education (SPHE) teacher. While it was not possible to interview each teacher, it was felt that the Principal was a good representation of the school opinion and stance on most issues. The Principal is involved in all policy formation and sits on all boards which have decision-making power. Given the hierarchical nature of the staff body, it was thought that the Principal's opinions and attitudes would be most influential. As an interviewee, the SPHE teacher is most important as she is responsible for delivering the RSE programme, and it is through this class that the topic of sexual orientation would most commonly be addressed. Bullying would also be addressed in this class, and the SPHE teachers are often seen to be a link between students who are being bullied and getting help. The attitudes and opinions of the SPHE teacher were deemed crucial for these reasons. The PE teacher was selected to represent the rest of the staff body who may not be so aware of such issues. PE is also a class where students are allowed to interact socially through games and sport, and so it was thought that his observations would more accurately depict the reality of intercommunication between children. One must take great care to ensure the sample is truly representative (Bell, 2005). It could be considered unbiased to take a random selection of teachers, however, it was felt these specific teachers had the characteristics which truly and accurately represented the staff body.

To gain an insight into the experience of being a gay student at this school, interviews were also conducted with a recent past pupil who identifies as gay, and an LGB youth

worker who serves the children in this school amongst others. This youth group works in conjunction with 'BeLonG To', a national youth service for Lesbian Gay Bisexual & Transgender (LGBT) young people in Ireland.

Interviews were conducted in the style of open-ended questions, where the interviewees had scope to include topics which they felt were important. These qualitative interviews were then transcribed, and thematically analysed. The findings, where relevant and appropriate, are supported by direct quotations from interview transcripts.

School Policy

Bullying Policy

The school understood bullying as making someone else feel '*uncomfortable*'. The policy was very broad, lacked specifics, and tended to focus on less sensitive issues. As one participant stated, '*Bullying can be anything from a boot at the locker, to taking someone's stuff, to destroying someone's property*'. The policy encompassed no references to bullying incited by homophobia. However, if homophobia was not named as wrong, it would not be considered as such. The Principal reported extreme reluctance to include an anti-homophobic bullying clause in the school policy. She believed it would not make a difference to the lives of gay and lesbian students. Her reluctance to include such a clause rendered homophobic bullying increasingly '*invisible*', and suggested she wished not to address the problem, although it later became apparent it was quite prevalent in the school.

Fear of parents was a determining factor when deciding not to include homophobia in the bullying policy. While the Principal did suggest such a clause may be beneficial to students, this was off-put by the presumption that parents would disapprove, and may see it as '*encouraging*' children to become gay. The same fear influenced the non-inclusion of homosexual education: '*It's a sensitive issue that would certainly involve parents*'. The Principal believed the majority of parents in the school would come from a '*conservative viewpoint*' and would be fearful that exposure to LGB issues might result in their child becoming gay. This fear of parental opinion was echoed by the SPHE teacher, who felt she must be cautious not to include too much education on homosexuality as it was '*tricky in terms of parental aspects*'. Parents in the area either were homophobic, or were perceived to be. It is not clear as to whether this parental

homophobia is real or assumed, however, acceptance by parents of homosexuality as an equal orientation is obviously missing.

Discussion

Recommendations that a specific anti-homophobic clause should be included in schools' bullying charters has been reiterated time and time again, both in the international and Irish context (Graybill et. al, 2009; Minton et. al, 2008; O'Higgins-Norman, 2008, Norman, 2010). Fear of parental disapproval was cited by all as a reason not to include such a clause. This phenomenon was seen in the USA in the late 90s, where 18% of teachers also referred to this fear of parent disapproval (Douglas et. al, 1999), and again in Ireland (Norman, 2006). Non-inclusion of an anti-homophobic clause adds to the continued silence of LGB issues (Hyde and Howlett, 2005), and to write in such a clause could be seen as the first step to creating an inclusive environment. (Buston and Harte, 2001; Hyde and Howlett, 2005).

Homophobia

Homophobic Bullying

Homophobia via cyber bullying was referred to by all interviewed as a major problem in school. This came mainly in the form of Facebook, but also through text messages and email. However, the primary form of homophobic abuse was verbal, and took place in school, during school hours. Those in the junior cycle were reported by all teachers interviewed as the worst for name-calling, which is often coupled with graffiti on toilet walls and copy books. This correlates with research that shows homophobia begins at a young age, and so it is of utmost importance that anti-homophobic education begins early.

Accepting Homophobia

Homophobic name-calling was not considered a grave breach of school policy, and was worthy only of small sanctions: *'That type of bullying would be frowned on. While I would verbally reprimand the student on the spot, I wouldn't take it further'*. Usual sanctions for misbehaviour were not applied to homophobic name-calling *'unless it was on-going'*. The consideration of homophobia as a minor demeanour sent the message to children that homophobia is 'okay'. This was also discouraging to

victims of this type of bullying, who may have felt that their experience was belittled or was not worthy of complaint.

According to the past pupil, instances of homophobic name-calling were largely ignored. Little appeared to have changed. LGB slurs such as *'faggot'* and *'dyke'* were referred to by the PE teacher as *'the standard'*, implying that such verbal abuses were commonplace throughout the school. He suggested this type of name-calling is not really bullying, but is a type of *'horseplay'*. It was obvious that the teacher was unaware of the severe damage that can be done through this type of bullying, and in fact excused the behaviour altogether, believing it was simply a case of students *'trying to stand up for themselves'*. The Principal also suggested LGB slurs were not considered serious by students; *'a lot of the kids would say that's not bullying at all, it's only messing'*. By allowing LGB slurs to go under the radar, the invisibility of LGB students continued.

Addressing Homophobia

The Principal reported that while teachers would intervene during verbal homophobic abuse, and rebuke children for being *'disrespectful'*, it was not necessarily followed by an explanation as to why it was wrong or disrespectful to use such language, nor was it taken as an opportunity to teach children about gay rights or equality. Similarly, the SPHE teacher tackled such homophobic abuse by telling the students how *'ridiculous it was to say that'*, again with no further education as to why homophobia was wrong.

Teachers received no formal training and were expected to *'just know'* how to deal with bullying. Knowledge of an effective way to deal with homophobic bullying was obviously absent. A lack of LGB awareness training for teachers was noted as a contributor to homophobic bullying in schools by the youth worker, who felt that teachers were simply unequipped to deal with this type of bullying.

Homophobia among Teachers, and the School as an Institution

Homosexuality was never referred to in a positive light by any of the staff. While diversity in ethnic background was encouraged and supported, diversity of sexuality

was clearly not. The Principal stated gay members of her staff were ‘*lucky*’, as homosexuality may not be accepted as ‘*easily*’ in other schools. However, tolerance of the existence of gay staff members was not coupled with wholehearted acceptance and embracement. The SPHE teachers spoke about the gay children in a similar manner - while she did say it was wrong to discriminate, an admission that it was in fact ‘*okay*’ to be gay was missing. A policy of tolerance, rather than acceptance seemed to be in place, and contributed to institutional homophobia. This attitude was reflected in the experience of the past pupil: ‘*You’re told never to call anyone a nigger, never use derogatory terms towards people because they are black or Muslim or whatever. But you can say whatever you want to gay people and it’s not a problem*’. It was clear that there was a greater level of consciousness in relation to racist bullying by comparison with homophobic bullying.

Discussion

All teachers were aware of homophobic bullying and name calling in the school. Norman et. al (2006) found that although 79% of teachers were aware such verbal abuse, few did anything to stop it. This type of behaviour was evident in this school also, where although teachers were aware, they did little or nothing to reprimand it. As seen in other Irish research (Norman 2004; 2010), the use of derogatory slurs was commonplace, concurrent with the finding of this study where terms such as ‘*faggot*’ and ‘*dyke*’ were noted as ‘*the standard*’. Verbal abuse of LGB students is often normalised in Irish schools, as can be seen research done by Minton et. al (2008), who found that although perpetrators were ‘*loud and open*’ in their abuse, teachers failed to reprimand or draw attention to it ‘*as if it was normal*’ (Minton et. al, 2008, p. 184). O’Higgins-Norman (2008) found a link between this lack of challenge and the level to which they were used throughout the school. The less frequently students were reprimanded, the more likely they were to continue with similar behaviour.

Respondents in a UK survey reported an inadequate coverage of LGB issues in their teacher training, and a lack of confidence in dealing with such matters (Sherriff et. al, 2011), issues which were evident in this school also. Specific training on LGB issues is not provided in Ireland, shown to be an important strategy by Graybill et. al (2009) who found teachers-in-training who did not receive LGB support-training were

lacking in knowledge, under-trained, and became potentially unwilling to address LGB issues in the future.

Whilst consciousness in relation to racist bullying is important, the Principal downplayed the significance of homophobic bullying by comparison, thus rendered the experiences of LGB young people as somehow less important. This also failed to recognise the possibility of multiple oppressions - the experiences of those students who are, for example, black *and* gay, or non-English speaking *and* lesbian.

Heteronormativity

Gender Roles

According to the youth worker, students reported the constant use of heterosexist gender roles, and a nuclear family stereotype in RSE and SPHE classes; *'it's always Ben and Ann, Mammy and Daddy and the two kids'*. Children in the youth centre articulated a difficulty in trying to fit into these roles. They were unable to relate to the heterosexual chat amongst their friends and this placed a great strain on them. The youth worker made a strong recommendation to integrate LGB awareness into SPHE, and to try to normalise homosexuality through its inclusion in everyday speech.

Young men who did fit the stereotypical 'gay' boy had a particularly hard time at school; *'they didn't have to come out for people to bully them'*. There was a pressure on children to conform to these heterosexist roles, pressure which had a negative result on their self-esteem and mental health. For those who didn't fit the heterosexist role, this impact was palpable; *'I just felt different, not normal like everyone else'* [past pupil]. When asked why he thought students use the term 'gay' in a derogatory way, the PE teacher responded that it was *'against the norm'*. The SPHE teacher claimed that talking about homosexuality is *'completely unsuitable for younger children'*, yet admitted to discussion of heterosexual relationships in junior classes. Such views from staff may have contributed to an atmosphere whereby homosexuality was constructed as abnormal or wrong.

Homosexuality as a 'Taboo' Subject

The taboo nature of homosexuality and homophobic bullying was first recognised by the unwillingness of staff to address the issue until provoked. While there was an obvious enthusiasm to discuss anti-bullying measures implemented to protect ethnic minorities, the topic of homophobic bullying was not raised until addressed by the interviewer. This was despite the extreme prevalence of this type of bullying which became evident as the interviews progressed. The concern for the inclusion of ethnic minorities was obvious from the art displays, lunch time groups, and Open Night for Foreign Nationals held at the school. However, this was juxtaposed by the complete invisibility of LGB issues. The significant effort of the school to embrace different nationalities, in contrast to the complete lack of recognition of gay children was bitterly remembered by the past pupil; *‘International Day was a big thing, all about being from different countries and religions. God knows they never recognised gay kids; probably prefer if we all died off’*. The invisibility of LGB children was particularly poignant here. LGB students clearly are not recognised or accepted.

The social prohibition of homosexuality within the school extended to fear of actually using the word ‘gay’ or the phrase ‘homophobic bullying’:

If they did express...you know..., openly, it might help them (Principal).

I don’t think you would put...something like that...in the [bullying] policy (SPHE teacher).

There are members of staff here who are...you know (Principal).

I’d say there are a couple of kids in the school who are...who have those characteristics (P.E teacher).

Not using these words gave them a certain power, and allowed the negative power and taboo around homosexuality to grow.

Discussion

Addressing homosexuality in this school is characterised by discomfort or fear of the topic, with teachers unable to even use the word ‘gay’. Corresponding research by Sherriff et. al (2011) found this fear of using the words ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ were due to a fear of causing offence, which may also be the case in this instance. Heteronormativity permeated the SPHE class, where discussion of homosexuality was spoken about ‘indirectly’, but relationships were usually framed in what the youth

worker described as ‘*mammy and daddy*’, and the nuclear family. As noted by Khayatt (1995), the school reflected a heterosexist preference in its lack of discussion about LGB in SPHE, in its daily interactions, and in its refusal to include an anti-homophobic bullying clause. By not referring to LGB, it was assumed that everyone is heterosexual, often resulting in LGB being constructed as ‘abnormal’ or ‘wrong’. This opinion of homosexuality as an ‘abnormality’ echoed the findings of Reygan (2009), who found that 50% of respondents in a 25-school survey framed homosexuality in such terms.

Summary and Conclusions

The school was found to be both heterosexist and homophobic, and generally was not inclusive of all sexual orientations. It was found that homophobia was very common in the school, with verbal slurring being particularly prevalent. Derogatory terms such as ‘dyke’, and ‘faggot’ were commonly used to describe people who may be perceived as LGB. Teachers were slow to reprimand students who used these terms and failed to identify the seriousness of such slurs. It was taken for granted by teachers that students would behave this way towards each other, and no attempt was made to break the cycle of ‘casual homophobia’. In turning a deaf ear to such behaviour, it was tacitly implied that this behaviour was acceptable. A need for better training around LGB awareness was obvious. LGB issues were shrouded by silence and taboo throughout the school. There was little discussion on LGB outside of SPHE class, diametrically opposed with the extensive efforts made to include children from different nationalities.

Recommendations

Develop Policies

A concrete anti-homophobic and LGB inclusive RSE curriculum should be mandatory taught. Guidelines should also be developed which address LGB issues across all other subjects, in place of constant heterosexist examples. In all equality policy used by the school, an LGB reference should be included. LGB children are likely to feel both safer and more recognised if homophobia and homophobic bullying are explicitly outlawed in the school’s anti-bullying policy.

Training on Homophobia and LGB Issues

Staff development is essential in creating an inclusive and safe environment for LGB children. They must be informed and equipped to deal with homophobia, and have the tools which allow them to create an LGB-friendly environment. LGB advocacy groups are excellent resources for such training, and every teacher should attend a workshop on these issues. This training should be attended by all members of staff, and not only those who are already responsible for addressing bullying. While having the correct policy in place is the first step, it is crucial that the entire staff body work to wipe out homophobia in the school. It is also important that these workshops would be attended annually or bi-annually and not be attended as a once off. Eliminating deeply ingrained institutional homophobia cannot be attained in one session.

Dealing with Homophobic Language

There is a need to consistently address the use of the term ‘gay’ as a negative, or as slang to refer to something bad. Tolerating this, and other LGB slurs, inadvertently gives permission for it to continue, and reinforces the negative image of homosexuality. The passive approach taken in the past must be replaced by a staff group which actively challenges every single incident of this misused language, and moreover, to *explain* to students why it is not acceptable.

Improving the Classroom

A whole school initiative to support LGB students may be greatly aided by the physical gesture of support through the placement of posters and ‘sign-posts’ as to where LGB support is available. This will allow children to seek support without needing to specifically request it from a teacher. Positive LGB posters can increase awareness and promote a less heteronormative environment. Students are influenced by their teachers, and so teachers may show-by-example by being seen to place the posters themselves.

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