

The political (mis)management of (homo)sexuality and (in)securities

Anita Hobson on schools' commitment to tackling homophobic bullying

Set against national research indicating the prolific nature of homophobic bullying towards children and young people, Liverpool City Council (LCC) made a commitment to prevent homophobia on a local level. Research commissioned by LCC into the perceived safety of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB) communities in Liverpool identified concerns regarding bullying experienced by children and young people.

Consequently, in 2010 the Anti-Homophobic Bullying Forum produced the 'Anti-Homophobic Bullying Strategy' (AHBS) which provides comprehensive and co-ordinated information for key partners in children's services and education underpinned by the key principle of schools investment in prevention rather than deploying 'crisis intervention' to support victims of homophobia (Liverpool Children, Families and Adults Service, 2010). The AHBS was launched by Peter Tatchell in an event supported by LCC, prior to 'rolling out' the strategy across education settings citywide. However, the cuts in funding to local councils have restricted LCC's prioritised AHBS implementation, indicative of reductions in resources nationally.

This withdrawal highlights a number of concerns and this article considers that despite government imposed austerity measures, action by schools need not be wholly contingent on increased funding. Through examination of the impact

of homophobic bullying and the ontological harm caused to those victimised in schools, it is evident that a commitment to challenging homophobia in schools is paramount.

Understanding homophobia

Homophobia may be defined as an irrational fear of people based on their actual or perceived 'deviant' sexual orientation which does not conform to the 'norm' of heterosexuality resulting in 'prejudice, often leading to acts of discrimination, sometimes abusive and violent' (Blumenfeld, 1992). However, the use of this singular term neglects wider issues around morality, human rights and the personal distress associated with acts of abuse perpetrated against LGB people. Crucially, the prejudice and prevailing abuse is based on the intrinsic characteristics of the individual, rather than a random act of violence, thus hurting the individual more. This can lead to internalised homophobia whereby feelings of self-hatred and low self-esteem can develop through continued oppression.

Homophobia can be identified at various interrelated levels: on a personal level through the processes of socialisation; on a cultural level through the promotion of heterosexuality as superior to

'deviations' from stereotypical gender 'norms' thereby reinforcing acceptable behavioural 'norms' collectively, and on an institutional level through the lack of clear policy and/or will to address homophobia. Through a lack of action, particularly in schools, LGB young people are subject to discriminatory practices and the perpetuation of homophobic attitudes, underpinned by the dominant assumption that heterosexuality is *the* acceptable sexual orientation (Hunt and Jensen, 2007).

Empirical research shows that over half of young LGB pupils have been victimised and experience what is commonly termed as 'homophobic bullying' (Stonewall, 2009).

However, if placed on a continuum (based on the seriousness of threat and/or violence and recurrence/persistence), much abuse can be defined as homophobic hate crime. This is formally responded to in predominantly adult settings (for example, the workplace, institutions, public spaces) however, in the

classroom and playground where it is acknowledged and acted upon, it may be euphemistically referred to as 'bullying'. This can serve to trivialise the distressing impact on young people whilst perpetuating

prejudice amongst peer groups and intolerance in wider, adult society.

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Marginalised

Young people are susceptible to bullying dependent upon a range of perceived 'differences' such as religious beliefs, disability, ethnicity and sexual orientation. While there is more attention paid to the victimisation of LGB communities in recent years, historically this group has been marginalised in terms of research and policy making, thus reproducing the dominant accepted 'norm' of (hetero)sexuality. Historically, the culture of bias against 'homosexuals' (a problematic term due to its medical origins, implying a curable



condition) was engendered through religious doctrines and punitive laws enacted by the state. This legal sanctioning of violence was endorsed to 'protect' society from 'immorality' through discriminatory laws thus criminalising any such deviations from the heterosexual 'norm':

consequently, the reproduction of 'normal' social codes of behaviour becomes culturally embedded while legitimising oppression and social exclusion.

Until the *Sexual Offences Act 1967*, it was a criminal offence to be 'homosexual' in England and Wales and there was no protection afforded specifically to the gay community in human rights discourse. More recently, international human rights treaties such as the European Convention on Human Rights, provide for sexual orientation human rights legal principles. Furthermore, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child identifies state parties obligation to ensure all under 18 year olds enjoy all the rights set out in the Convention without discrimination. The *Equality Act 2010* further strengthens rights to

protection from discrimination: a duty incumbent on public bodies including schools.

Implementation of principles

However, while such advancements are commendable, there remains a

distinct neglect at national and local levels of mechanisms to ensure the implementation of these principles. This is evident in the continued and current reports of harassment, isolation and violence experienced by LGB young people (Association of Teachers and

Lecturers, 2010; Hunt and Jensen, 2007; Stonewall, 2009). Ostensibly, legal protection for victims of homophobic hate crime in England and Wales is provided for in the *Criminal Justice Act 2003* (section 146: effective 2005) which imposes longer sentences where hostility aggravated by homophobia can be proven, whilst the *Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008* (section 74) provides for

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the offence of incitement of hatred on the grounds of sexual orientation.

With regard to the legal requirement of schools, it is incumbent upon governors to ensure there is an anti-bullying policy in place and, under the *Education and Inspections Act 2006*, to ensure all forms, including homophobic bullying, are dealt with. However, it is for schools to implement the relevant guidance documents produced by the Department for Education. In relation to the victimisation of the LGB community, the aforementioned reforms provide protection for individual's human rights, criminal statute principles and government policy guidance documents; however, their efficacy lies in the will to execute them, specifically by teachers in education settings. While there was an undertaking by the government to introduce a statutory subject, Personal Social and Health Education (PSHE) in the *Children, Schools and Families Bill 2011*, this clause was removed. Thus, the promotion of the well-being of children and young people and provision of anti-bullying programmes is rendered less important.

According to Hunt and Jensen (2007) two thirds of LGB young people have suffered direct homophobic bullying while further research found that 'nine in ten secondary school teachers and more than two in five primary school teachers say homophobic bullying occurs in their school' (Stonewall, 2009). Given the prevalence of victimisation, the need for a cohesive strategy to educate and promote understanding in schools is evident and not only for pupils. A two year study conducted by the National Union of Teachers (2010) found that 98.8 per cent of teachers had

witnessed a homophobic incident, 57 per cent had been a victim of homophobia and 70 per cent wanted training on how to deal

with such abuse. The pejorative use of the term 'gay' by peers in schools is common parlance, referring to all things 'rubbish' or 'bad' and rarely

perceived as bullying, but promotes negative feelings of isolation and fear for those perceived to be gay and for LGB young people.

Although schools lack financial resources to implement AHB strategies, challenging homophobic references requires little funding rather, a change to schools' culture at grassroots level. Studies show that the impact of victimisation and bullying based on sexual orientation is significant.

Children and young people affected/targeted for abuse are more likely to experience a range of mental health problems and an increased risk of self harm and suicide; are more likely to truant and underachieve in educational

attainment; lack confidence and experience feelings of fear and loneliness (Association of Teachers and Lecturers, 2010). Crucially, incidents of victimisation in schools are commonly frequent and persist for long periods. However, while '98 per cent of schools have anti-bullying policies, only around six per cent of schools have specific policies to deal with homophobic bullying' (Association of Teachers and Lecturers, 2010).

Intervention is paramount

The action of (young) perpetrators of homophobic hate crimes reflects a

cultural homophobia across wider society rather than the isolated actions of an individual. It is recognised that family and peer groups influence attitudes and behaviours however, the role of schools in age-appropriate education and intervention is paramount. Concomitantly there is a need for more extensive training in diversity and bias for teachers and continued re-training to promote awareness and address the

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prejudice which presupposes homophobic bullying and hate crime and the harm caused to the individual security of LGB communities. Notwithstanding the lack of specific anti-homophobic bullying policies in schools and reduced resources, a

culture of inclusion may be promoted through a range of government sponsored and non-government organisations' guidance on effective policies and practices to raise awareness and provide prevention strategies. Arguably, this is not contingent solely on PSHE lessons but should be integral values within education settings.

While council funded training resources are valuable, the current restricted access should not render homophobic bullying unchallenged by schools: a continued neglect serves to sustain the young perpetrator's belief that 'deviations'

from heterosexuality are unacceptable, which often prevails into adulthood. There is an identified need to formulate effective responses to the hostility experienced by young LGB people as the continued existence of homophobia as a demonstration of hate and exclusion is, as Hall states (2005) 'a moral, political and above all a social issue that transcends the concerns of criminal justice'. ■

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