'I Am the Hate that Dare Not Speak its Name': Dealing with homophobia in secondary schools

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This paper describes the outcomes of a small-scale project involving 19 secondary schools. The project investigated how effectively issues of homophobic bullying and sexualities were addressed through secondary schools' formal policies and areas of the curriculum. Outcomes indicate that sexual orientation was mentioned in two-thirds of Equal Opportunities policies but was not mentioned specifically in any Anti-Bullying policies. Staff highlighted the need for training in issues surrounding sexualities, homophobic bullying and clarification of Section 28. Implications for the work of educational psychologists are discussed, including raising awareness and clarifying issues in schools as well as informing whole school development work.

Introduction

In schools there is a growing body of research evidence to suggest that: (1) homophobic bullying is more severe than general bullying; (2) homophobic bullying is not always taken as seriously as other forms of bullying by teachers, even being seen as a "natural" reaction of young men; and that (3) 40% of young gay people in a survey had attempted suicide (Douglas, Warwick, Kemp, & Whitty, 1997; Robertson & Monsen, 2001).

Some harmful psychosocial short-term and long-term effects of bullying in general have been identified. For those bullied, these can include loss of esteem and confidence, withdrawal, being unable to concentrate, truancy, school-phobia and attempted suicide. Longer-term effects can include feelings of guilt and shame,

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depression and anxiety, fear of meeting strangers, social isolation and exceptional timidity (Elliot & Kilpatrick, 1994).

Trenchard and Warren (1984) surmised that gay and lesbian pupils are a vulnerable group, identifying a higher suicide rate among lesbian and gay pupils as compared with the general population. Rivers (2001) found that experiences of homophobic bullying in school were often long term, systematic and perpetrated by groups of peers. Victims were unlikely to report to teachers or someone at home—leading to increased perceptions of isolation. Much of the prejudice, discrimination and victimisation that leads to many of the difficulties associated with developing a non-heterosexual identity are encountered at school.

A study conducted within the United Kingdom by Stonewall (Mason & Palmer, 1996) reported that 48% of respondents aged under 18 years had experienced violence, with 90% having experienced name-calling because of their perceived sexual orientation. Of the violent attacks reported, 50% involved fellow students and 40% took place within school. Douglas et al. (1997) found that few schools attempt to counter such experiences either directly through mentoring, counselling and equal opportunity policies, or indirectly through the curriculum and general ethos of the school.

Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act appeared to confuse many schools about how to address issues of homosexuality and bisexuality within their schools—this served to reinforce the "silence" surrounding the subject. Section 28 demanded that a Local Authority "must not 'promote homosexuality' or 'promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretend family relationship" (28.–1 (2A)).

Epstein (1994), for example, found that four out of five teachers wanted further clarification on Section 28, and 56% said that its continued existence made it difficult to meet the needs of lesbian, gay and bisexual pupils. However, Department of the Environment Circular 12/88 made it clear that "Section 28 does not affect the activities of school governors nor of teachers. It will not prevent the objective discussion of homosexuality in the classroom, nor the counselling of students concerning their sexuality" (section 20).

The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted, 2002) published a report on sex and relationship education, which stated that in many schools nothing was being done to challenge homophobic attitudes. During inspections and surveys with 140 primary, secondary and special schools, discussions with 650 young people, postal surveys of 1000 primary, secondary and special schools in 20 local educational authorities, and meetings with education and health professionals, it was found that schools' different interpretations of their aims and values produced confusions regarding what was deemed acceptable and unacceptable. Ofsted commented that this could result in homophobic attitudes going unchallenged in too many schools and derogatory terms about homosexuality being part of everyday practice.

In the report, year 8 and year 10 pupils pointed out the insufficient coverage of sexuality issues by schools. "We never talk about homosexuality. There are over a thousand boys in this school and it must be an issue for some of them. But the staff

seem scared to talk about it" (year 10 pupil, all-male school). Ofsted recommended that "schools should make sure that values relevant to education about sex and relationships are consistently adhered to within the school so that, for example, homophobic attitudes do not go unchallenged" and "teachers should be given further guidance about content and methods in teaching about sexuality" (2002, p. 34).

Where Do We Go From Here?

In a study conducted in 1993, Comely (1993) made proposals about how educational psychologists could assist lesbian and gay teenagers at school. Among other suggestions, she advised that professionals should be aware of the issues surrounding this area from day one of their careers, and felt that lesbian and gay issues should be part of the equal opportunities component of training courses and as part of post-qualification training. Counselling components and teaching materials should address and reflect lesbian and gay lifestyles.

Imich, Bayley, and Farley (2001) suggested that educational psychologists, in their work with schools, should inform schools of how the legislation does and does not limit them in their work and how to explore whole school approaches and school policies in relation to bullying and equalities.

The present study aimed to investigate the extent to which secondary schools addressed issues of homophobic bullying and sexualities through formal policies and the Personal Social Health Education (PSHE) curriculum.

Method

The present study was undertaken between May and July 2002 and involved the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods. Nineteen secondary schools were included in the study.

Research Materials

A questionnaire eliciting both quantitative and qualitative data on the issue of homophobic bullying and sexualities was devised (see Appendix 1). It was requested that the questionnaire be completed by either the school's PSHE coordinator or an alternative appropriate staff member. The questionnaire investigated issues such as the contents of the PSHE curriculum, the schools methods of dealing with incidents of homophobic bullying, staff training, knowledge and understanding of Section 28 of the Local Government (Amended) Act and its implications for schools. Schools were invited to provide any additional information and comments.

Copies of the sex education, equal opportunities, PSHE and behaviour/bullying policies were requested from the sample schools. These policies were then analysed for the inclusion of issues surrounding sexualities and homophobia.

The areas of the PSHE curriculum in which issues of sexuality were addressed were tallied for all schools. The number of "yes" and "no" answers to the questions

Table 1. Information from policies

Policy type	Total received	Policies with reference to sexuality	Policies with no reference to sexuality
Sex education	7	1	6
Equal opportunities	9	6	3
PSHE curriculum	3	0	3
Anti-bullying	7	0	7
Behaviour	10	0	10

regarding staff training, familiarity with Section 28 and whether or not there were implications for the PSHE curriculum were tallied for all schools. Information received regarding how the school deals with the issue of homophobic bullying, what they feel the implications of Section 28 are for the PSHE curriculum and any further comments were recorded.

Outcomes

Of the 19 schools included in the sample, 13 schools returned a completed questionnaire; a response rate of 68%. Ten of these schools also sent copies of their school policies.

Policy Analysis

Reference to homophobia/homophobic bullying in policies

Table 1 indicates that none of the policies received from schools directly referred to the issues of homophobia and/or homophobic bullying, although they did refer to sexual orientation.

Reference to Sexuality in Policies

It was only within the Sex Education and/or the Equal Opportunities policies that the issue of sexuality was directly referred to. No direct mention was made in any of the Anti-Bullying or Behaviour policies or in the PSHE curriculum documents. Only one of the Sex Education policies received directly referred to issues of sexuality, whereas six (67%) of the Equal Opportunities policies received directly referred to issues of sexuality.

Questionnaire Analysis

Table 2 indicates that 92% of schools address issues of sexuality through the area of Sex Education within PSHE lessons. Over one-half of the schools address issues of sexuality in relation to Bullying and Family and Parenting.

Table 2. Reference made to sexualities in the PSHE curriculum

Area of PSHE curriculum	Percentage of schools addressing the issue of sexuality
Sex education	92
Bullying	54
Family and parenting	54
Equal opportunities	46
Citizenship	23

Responses to Questionnaire

(a) *How is the issue of homophobic bullying dealt with at your school?*
Verbatim comments in response to this question were as follows:

- It is "identified as one of a wide range of 'differences' over which bullies might bully (alongside race, religion, accent, physical appearance, intelligence, interests, football team supported and so on). General advice on strategies for dealing with bullying are given." This school also stated that they "identify reasons from within the bully's emotional condition to explain bullying behaviour".
- The most difficult form of bullying to deal with.
- It is "part of the Bullying Policy".
- Through a "limited" discussion in PSE/Life skills lessons. The school stated that the "agenda" is set by the teacher and "led".
- As with any other bullying issues, by Head of Year or Senior Management if more serious.
- Mentioned but not in great detail.
- Unsure at present due to start of cross-curricular delivery. I suspect through Drama in Bullying/Prejudice units.
- All forms of bullying—including homophobia—are dealt with in the same way—by the pastoral system including group tutors and Heads of Year. Teachers may deal with homophobic incidents if pupils bring them to them.

One school did not complete this section of the questionnaire, and one school replied "It isn't really!" to the question regarding dealing with homophobic bullying.

(b) *Training experiences*
Tables 3 and 4 indicate that two schools responded that they had received training on equal opportunity issues in the past two years and only one of these training packages included a direct focus on how to deal with homophobic bullying. For this one school only one member of staff, the PSHE coordinator, received the training package.

Table 3. Have staff received training on
equal opportunity issues in the past two
years?

Response	Percentage
Yes	15.4
No	69.2
Unsure	15.4

Table 4. Has the training received on
equal opportunities referred to
homophobic bullying?

Response	Percentage
Yes	7.7
No	76.9
Unsure	15.4

Table 5. Knowledge of Section 28

Response	Percentage
Yes	23.1
No	53.8
Familiar with some of the Act	7.7
Unanswered	15.4

(c) *Knowledge and understanding of Section 28*
Table 5 shows that over three-quarters of the respondents were not familiar with the contents of Section 28, with regard to their role within school.

Respondents were then asked if they considered there to be implications of Section 28 in relation to the PSHE Curriculum. Six (46%) of the 13 schools replied there were currently implications of Section 28 in relation to the PSHE curriculum. These were specified as:

- sensible teaching;
- how we teach—promote family life and marriage;
- relates to citizenship;
- staff could receive criticism if they are interpreted as "promoting homosexuality" and

- in addition, "staff feel uncomfortable with 'informing' about homosexuality unless they receive training".

Only one school responded that they did not consider there currently to be implications of Section 28 in relation to the PSHE curriculum. This school replied that "Section 28 applies to promotion of homosexuality. In school we discuss it we don't promote it. It is therefore not relevant to us".

Two (15%) of the 13 schools had been unable to answer this section of the questionnaire. One of these respondents replied "don't know" and the other simply responded with a question mark.

(d) *Further comments*

Finally, there was an opportunity to provide further comment. These included:

- We are about to have whole staff training on Equal Opportunities following Racial Incident Policy.
- Bullying is dealt with in PSE in years 7–8. Revisited later re: homophobic bullying but emphasis is not great.
- Other school approaches would be useful to know.
- Homophobic bullying is rife, particularly at the year 8–9 levels but it is verbal only. Often the bullies do not understand the full implications or meanings of what they are saying.
- Staff INSET would be useful!

Discussion

The research reported in this paper indicates that, within the sample of schools surveyed, sexual orientation is raised in two-thirds of Equal Opportunity documents. However, the theme of "sexual orientation" is not directly tackled in any of the Anti-Bullying documents received. It is interesting to note that questionnaire respondents commented that in dealing with homophobic bullying they referred to their Anti-Bullying policy. This would indicate that, contrary to staff opinions, there is no clear understanding of the need for policies in schools regarding how to manage homophobic bullying.

Cross-referencing of policies is necessary. Clearly, as staff in this study have commented, they can employ *general* anti-bullying strategies from such documentation, but homophobic bullying has a pervasive and covert nature, as many research studies illustrate (Rivers, 2001).

Given this, why can the issue not be directly referred to alongside other forms of bullying that schools commonly identify, such as those linked to ethnicity, gender, disability and perceived academic ability? Could it be, as Imich et al. (2001) note, that the "invisibility" of homosexuality and lesbianism can be a potential problem for teenagers? It is imperative that this barrier is acknowledged and addressed. Good practice would dictate that, rather than "dealing with homophobic incidents if pupils bring them to them" (as one respondent commented), a more pro-active approach

will be more supportive of the whole school community rather than a reactive one (Robertson & Monsen, 2001).

Sexuality appears to be addressed within the Sex Education Curriculum and in PSHE lessons as one part of bullying behaviour. Further research may be needed to clarify whether sexuality, and indeed homosexuality and bisexuality, is seen mainly as a biological topic rather than also a social–emotional topic. There are important implications for the emotionally literate ethos of a school in supporting curriculum content and discussions of sexuality and relationships. Flood (2000) comments that if emotional literacy is not encouraged, homophobia and thus homophobic bullying may be a consequence: "the expression of any emotion or feeling, much less a behaviour or action, considered to be 'feminine' [is prohibited]. This is a broader conceptualisation of homophobia" (p. 4).

The questionnaire responses indicated some confusion in schools as to what Section 28 was and the implications that there might be arising in relation to Section 28 and the PSHE Curriculum. Epstein (1994) stated that "because teachers did not know how to comply with it [Section 28] they erred on the side of caution". Only one school in this current research considered there to be no implications for schools. The reason given for this was based on the actual wording of Section 28—they said they "discussed" rather than "promoted" homosexuality as opposed to showing a full understanding that Section 28 applies to the local education authority and not individual schools. Comments from schools support Ofsted (2002), which reported that the different interpretations of aims and values in terms of sexuality produce confusion in dealing with issues of sexuality in schools. The need for staff training and clarification with regards to Section 28 highlighted in Ofsted (2002) was reflected in comments from the respondents.

Clearly there are limitations with the current study. It would be useful to extend this research to include a much larger sample, including schools from all sectors, and to then conduct structured interviews with key staff and pupils to clarify in greater detail the complex themes which emerge. By gaining pupil views, opportunities arise to explore perceptions of the occurrence and extent of homophobic bullying. However, caution would need to be exercised given the sensitivity of this area, it may be necessary to consider ways of allowing pupils to give their views in a safe and confidential environment.

Recommendations

The schools' anti-bullying "Charter for Action" was launched by Ivan Lewis, MP, in November 2003 (Department for Education and Skills, 2003). Heads and Governors were invited to adopt this Charter in which they commit the whole school community to a culture where bullying is not tolerated and is actively tackled. The Charter recommends a key set of actions for schools to take to prevent and deal with bullying. It is encouraging that specific direction is given for addressing homophobic bullying.

Only one member of staff in one school in this sample had received training on how

to deal with homophobic bullying. Schools themselves identify a need for further clarification and training on Section 28 and the implications it has for the school in addressing homosexuality and homophobic bullying. Educational psychologists could be well placed to provide such training packages.

The educational psychologist needs to *actively* raise schools' awareness by undertaking consultation regarding whole school development and policy writing. Educational psychologists could participate in discussions on how school policies relate to the curriculum and are employed in practice.

Educational psychologists could directly challenge and support schools in instances of observed homophobic bullying and use of inappropriate language by staff and students. Already in existence are support packages and information prompts of which educational psychologists should be aware and refer to in their discussions with schools. The NAS/UWT and NUT (2002) have both produced guidance on dealing with homophobic bullying, which includes strategies on how to deal with this issue and clarifies Section 28 for teaching staff. The Department for Education and Skills (2000) published an Anti-Bullying package entitled *Bullying—Don't Suffer in Silence*—of which each school is entitled to a free copy—and educational psychologists should promote this documentation. Within this pack, bullying in relation to sexual orientation is recognised and strategies for dealing with this are listed. The Charter for Action (Department for Education and Skills, 2003) builds upon this advice.

The dearth of research by Educational Psychology Services into this topic is disappointing. The need for further investigation should be clear and is indeed necessary in developing emotionally literate school communities. This should be supported by whole service training, consultation and subsequent action, with the item to remain on all Educational Psychology Services' agendas.

Given the distressing implications for the mental health of young people as a result of homophobic bullying, it is vital that we acknowledge the educational psychologist's unique position. Since the writing of this paper, on Thursday 10 July 2003 the House of Lords voted to repeal Section 28 of the Local Government Act (1988) in England and Wales. However, some local education authorities have nonetheless decided to keep in tact their own "versions" of Section 28, and these decisions have largely gone unchallenged.

Educational psychologists can ensure that the discussion, consideration and implementation of proactive strategies with regards to issues surrounding sexuality continue to be raised and addressed within schools.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire

I am currently undertaking some research concerned with issues surrounding bullying. I would be grateful if you could complete the following questionnaire and return by _____.

Please note that all school identities will remain anonymous.

Address to: [Name of Assistant EP and base address]

A copy of the research findings can be made available to your school, on request, after _____.

THANKING YOU IN ADVANCE FOR YOUR HELP AND SUPPORT.

THIS QUESTIONNAIRE IS INTENDED TO BE COMPLETED BY THE SCHOOL'S PSHE CO-ORDINATOR. IF THIS PERSON IS UNAVAILABLE, PLEASE CONSULT IN SCHOOL AND ASK THE APPROPRIATE MEMBER OF STAFF TO COMPLETE, AND RETURN TO THE ADDRESS/FAX ABOVE

Title:..

Please tick PSHE Curriculum areas where issues of sexuality are addressed.

Bullying   Sex Education   Family and Parenting

Equal Opportunities   Citizenship

Other (please specify)

How is the issue of homophobic bullying dealt with at your school?

Please continue on a separate sheet and attach, if necessary.

Have school staff received training on equal opportunity issues as whole school INSET in the last two years? Please tick the appropriate response.

       YES   NO   UNSURE

If YES, has the training included reference to homophobic bullying?

       YES   NO   UNSURE

Are you familiar with the contents of Section 28 of Local Government (Amended) Act (1988), with regard to your position as school? Please tick the appropriate box.

       YES   NO

Do you consider there to be implication of Section 28 in relation to the PSHE Curriculum?

       YES   NO

If YES, please specify what you think these might be

Please continue on a separate sheet and attach, if necessary

Any further comments gratefully received

Please see top for return address.

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR TIME