
VALUING VISIBILITY:
AN EXPLORATION OF HOW SEXUAL ORIENTATION ISSUES
ARISE AND ARE ADDRESSED IN POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS

SUMMARY REPORT

FOR VALUING VISIBILITY
SEMINAR

FINAL PHASE OF RESEARCH

Dr. Anne Lodge
Sandra Gowran
Karen O'Shea

“Although Ireland is making considerable progress in developing a culture of genuine equality, recognition and acceptance of gay men and women, there is still an undercurrent of both bias and hostility which young gay people must find deeply hurtful and inhibiting. For them, homosexuality is a discovery, not a decision and for many it is a discovery which is made against a backdrop where, within their immediate circle of family and friends as well as the wider society, they have long encountered anti-gay attitudes which will do little to help them deal openly and healthily with their own sexuality.

...we could and should decommission attitudes that encourage bullying of all sorts and in particular attitudes that are deeply hurtful to those who are homosexual”

Remarks by President of Ireland, Mary McAleese at the International Association of Suicide Prevention XXIV Biennial Conference, Irish National Events Centre, Killarney, Co Kerry, 31st August 2007

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1. INTRODUCTION

'Valuing Visibility: An Exploration of How Issues of Sexual Orientation Arise and Are Addressed in Post-primary Schools' is a research project funded by the Department of Education & Science and is being undertaken by the Education Department, NUI Maynooth in partnership with GLEN – Gay and Lesbian Equality Network.

The project has been endorsed by the National Parents Council Post-primary, the Joint Managerial Board for Secondary Schools, the Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools, the Irish Vocational Educational Association and the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals.

The research project seeks to understand how issues of sexual orientation arise for schools and to document positive inclusive practice being carried out by schools with a view to informing the work of the key education stakeholders in making schools safe and inclusive learning environments for lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) students.

This summary report sets out the key findings from the research process to date with a particular emphasis on the data collected through focus groups with senior school personnel and on the consultation process with the main stakeholders in education, including management, parent and teacher bodies.

Section 2 provides a brief outline of the methodology. Section 3 summarises the results of the literature review which focussed on issues arising for lesbian, gay and bisexual students in school and on the policy context. Section 4 summarises the results of the main part of the research, the focus groups with senior personnel from the participating schools. Section 5 summarises the key findings from consultations with key national stakeholders in education.

This summary report provides the basis for the last phase of the research: a multi-stakeholder seminar which will focus on identifying opportunities to address the issues raised in the research findings to date. The final section of this report outlines areas which will be explored further at this concluding seminar.

The final research report will incorporate the discussions at this seminar and will highlight strategic ways forward identified with the stakeholders.

2. METHODOLOGY

The focus in the research has been action oriented, with an emphasis on the involvement of schools to obtain a snapshot of sexual orientation issues that are currently arising, the challenges that schools face in responding to the issues, and from this to develop positive practice on how schools can be safe and supportive learning environments for LGB students.

In order to carry out this a number of methods were used:

- Desk-based research focusing on international good practice
- Preliminary consultation interviews with key individuals representing LGB people
- Focus group meetings and follow-on interviews with senior personnel from 18 schools
- Consultation and dialogue about the findings with key stakeholders in education

Focus Groups with Schools

An explicit aim of this research was to engage a variety of schools in exploring what issues were arising in relation to sexual orientation and to share any practice which sought to address these issues and the needs of lesbian and gay students.

It was expected that schools would opt into the research as a result of their own interest in the area. The original expectation was to have up to 10 schools involved, each of which would be represented at a focus group by two members of senior management (Principal, Deputy Principal or Assistant Principal). The number of schools who participated was higher than anticipated with a total of 15 schools participating in the focus groups, including;

- 5 Voluntary Secondary Schools (1 male; 3 female; 1 co-educational)
- 5 VEC Schools (including 3 community colleges)
- 4 Community Schools
- 1 Comprehensive School
- An additional three Principals were interviewed by telephone.

Focus group meetings were held in four regions, these were: the Greater Dublin area, the Midlands, the North West and the South East.

Attendance at focus group meetings was as follows:

Focus Group	Number of Schools	Total Number of Participants
Northwest	4	7
Greater Dublin Area	5	10
Midlands	4	7
South East	2	4

The individual representatives of schools who engaged in the research project were in the main from senior management and these included:

- 7 Principals
- 5 Deputy Principals
- 5 Assistant Principals
- 4 Guidance Counsellors
- 5 SPHE Teachers/Coordinators
- 1 Year Head
- 1 Adult Education Coordinator

At the end of each focus group, representatives were asked if they would be open to engaging in a follow-up interview in order to clarify any detail of current practice or practice which the school might be currently developing. As a result a total of 5 follow-up telephone interviews took place as well as the 3 additional interviews which were noted above.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW:

ISSUES FOR LGBT PEOPLE IN SECOND LEVEL SCHOOLS

3.1 What are the issues and concerns in relation to sexual orientation that are arising for young people in schools?

A key part of the research project was a review of literature which explored the issues of sexual orientation in schools, with a focus on international good practice. This section of the summary report describes from the available literature the position for young lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) people in second level school contexts.

Although considerable progress has been made in advancing protection for lesbian and gay people in Ireland research evidence consistently shows that young LGB people continue to face a range of difficulties.

In a recent survey undertaken in Ireland Minton, Dahl, O'Moore and Tuck (2008) reported that, of the sample of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) young people surveyed:

- over one fifth stated that they did not feel safe on their way to or from school
- Half of all respondents reported that they had been bullied in the last three months
- One third reported frequent (weekly/daily) verbal abuse, with a slightly higher number (34.3%) stating that they experience frequent verbal abuse about their sexuality
- A quarter reported indirect verbal bullying through spreading of rumours and lies
- One in five experienced physical bullying related to their actual or perceived sexual orientation.

The authors commend those students who persevered and stayed on in school but highlight concern for the 10% who stated that they left school earlier than they might otherwise have done (2008: 182-184).

When asked where they were bullied, the most common response was that bullying took place on the corridors of school, with other sites of bullying being playground/yard, toilets, changing rooms and walking to and from school. Overall the study highlighted that the issue of sexual orientation, particularly through homophobic bullying, is one which is present in Irish second level schools and one which, the authors suggest, requires significant attention by all education partners.

BeLonG To (2005), the dedicated LGBT youth project funded by the Office for the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs highlighted in a submission on suicide prevention to a Joint Oireachtas Committee that many young LGBT people attending their services were fearful of being bullied and victimised in school. They also highlighted marginalisation of young LGBT people in schools and the lack of inclusion of issues relating to LGBT identity within the curriculum.

Carolan & Redmond (2003) in research commissioned by the Department of Education in Northern Ireland, noted that 86% of their sample were aware of their sexual orientation in school, 44% stated that they were bullied whilst in school because of their sexual orientation. The study also highlighted that many young people left school earlier than they would have preferred and 65% of those who had achieved low results had also been bullied.

Hunt & Jensen (2006) in their study in Britain found that homophobic bullying was almost endemic. They state that almost two-thirds (65%) of young lesbian, gay and bisexual pupils experienced direct bullying. They also highlight an issue within faith based schools. In their report, they state that 75% of young gay people attending faith schools have experienced homophobic bullying.

In a study in Scotland, O'Loan, McMillan, Motherwell, Bell & Arshad, (2006) found a similar picture emerging. The results of an on-line survey of students (a group of 77 self selecting primary and secondary students, not all who identified as lesbian or gay) show that 84% of students were aware of homophobic bullying in their school and 52% were themselves being or had been homophobically bullied (2006 :100)

At a European level, the International Young Lesbian and Gay Organisation note that sixty-one percent of young LGBT people in Europe have experienced prejudice or discrimination at school. Further to this they highlight that across Europe, schools are experienced as being more unfriendly for LGBT youngsters, beating family (51.2%), community (37.7%) and friends' circle (29.8%), (IGLYO, 2007).

3.2 Policy Context and Responses

Within Ireland the Employment Equality Acts (1998 & 2004) and the Equal Status Acts (2000 & 2004) have significantly changed the equality landscape by addressing issues of discrimination and by including sexual orientation as one of the nine grounds under which an individual cannot be discriminated against. While both Acts outline what is prohibited in terms of discrimination the Equal Status Acts seek to ensure that schools do not discriminate in terms of admission or access of a student to a course.

In terms of education, the White Paper on Education, *Charting Our Education Future*, (1995) situates Irish education provision within the context of five core principles, namely quality, equality, partnership, pluralism and accountability. The Education Act (1998) and the Education Welfare Act (2000) have also brought significant changes to the educational landscape by ensuring that schools have a responsibility to publish their admission policies and to have a school plan which states the objectives of the school relating to equality of access to and participation in the school, it must also set out the measures the school will take to achieve these equality objectives (Lodge & Lynch, 2004: 11). The Education Welfare Act requires schools to develop codes of behaviour and discipline.

Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) as an aspect of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) was introduced by the Department of Education and Science in 1995 with implementation beginning in schools in 1997. The programme, which is a compulsory part of the school curriculum aims to help young people to acquire a knowledge and understanding of human relationships and sexuality.

Whole-school evaluation (WSE) is a process of external evaluation of the work of a school carried out by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education & Science and provided for within the Education Act (1998, section 7 (2)(b)). WSE evaluates the schools on a number of areas including the quality of support for students.

In 2006 the Department of Education and Science issued templates to assist schools in dealing with bullying incidences. The anti-bullying template explicitly includes homophobic bullying and provides suggested steps for schools to follow in developing and revising anti-bullying policy.

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Despite these important legislative and policy developments there is evidence to suggest that this has not translated into effective policy and practice to meet the needs of young LGB people in schools.

Norman (2004), in Department of Education & Science funded research among Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) teachers, highlighted that 90% of school policies on anti-bullying did not explicitly mention any reference to lesbian or gay related bullying. The research also highlighted that of the 36% of schools which stated they had an equal opportunities policy only 20% of these made reference to lesbian or gay issues. A total of 63% of SPHE teachers reported that their RSE policy did not include reference to lesbian or gay issues while at the same time 60% believed that the curriculum did allow for discussion.

Norman's research also highlighted that 64% of teachers surveyed thought their school was an appropriate setting where information about lesbian and gay issues could be made available, whereas in practice only 37% stated that their school had some information available. It was also noted in the study that nearly half (49%) of respondents reported that homosexuality and bisexuality was not addressed as part of the SPHE curriculum (2004: 10-12).

Minton et al (2008) also, albeit briefly, sought to consider the issue of support. Their report states that only 17.5% of their respondents had sought or experienced support around sexual orientation while at school. They note that several respondents stated that they had spoken to a school guidance counsellor.

In Northern Ireland, Carolan & Redmond (2003) noted that only 4% of respondents claimed to have received any information or support while at school leaving the majority of students looking to internet (50%), books or magazines (36%) LGBT Groups (22%) and the media generally (21%).

It is clear from the emerging research, that not only are young lesbian and gay students at risk of being victims of physical, verbal and emotional bullying but that they are also in danger of leaving school not having heard or experienced positive support in relation to their sexual orientation, with little affirmation or acknowledgement of their identity.

4. FINDINGS FROM FOCUS GROUPS AND FOLLOW-ON INTERVIEWS

Within the focus groups participants were asked to identify how issues related to sexual orientation arose in their schools and to explore the challenges that these issues presented for them and other school staff. Where possible participants were asked to provide examples of how the school was currently addressing these issues.

The following is a summary of the key issues and challenges. The final research report will present a fuller account of the focus groups and an overview of good practice in relation to these issues, where it exists.

4.1 Issues

The main issues that arise for schools can be grouped into four broad categories:

- **Homophobic Bullying and Name-calling**
- **Addressing the needs of vulnerable students**
- **Visibility of young lesbian, gay and bisexual students**
- **SPHE Curriculum**

4.1.1 Homophobic Bullying and Name-calling

For the majority of schools who participated, homophobic bullying was the main issue that they had to address in relation to sexual orientation and one that presented many concerns for them. A small number of participants were not aware of it being an issue in their school.

Many of the participating schools were able to give detailed examples of targeted incidents of homophobic bullying, both verbal and physical, on lesbian and gay students or those perceived to be LGB. Other participants identified the general use of the term 'gay' as an every day insult and provided a range of examples of this in practice.

Many participants felt that they needed guidance and support in addressing homophobic bullying and name-calling and also felt that they currently lacked the capacity to do so effectively.

I'm concerned about it. In our school there have been instances of graffiti being writing on the walls saying 'x is gay'. This kind of thing can be as a way of 'outing' someone as gay or as a way of putting them down. Either way the gay word is being used in a bad way. The School management are very concerned about the impact this kind of homophobia is having on gay students and staff. We want to deal with it and we are looking for guidance on the best way of addressing it.

Assistant Principal/Guidance Counsellor

There was a vicious circle of bullying in one case, I feel totally ill-equipped to deal with it. I have done a lot of training but not sure if it is enough. I feel the bullying may carry into second year as some boys are very hostile towards gay and lesbian people. We have nothing in our policies about sexuality. We do RSE, send out letters, nobody is withdrawn but we need more skills and training in the whole area.

Deputy Principal

Some participants were concerned about the lack of a whole school approach, including policy related to combating homophobic bullying and felt that this created an environment that could potentially put LGB students (and LGB teachers) at risk.

When homophobic language or bullying is not addressed I feel our school, however unwittingly, is giving its approval of homophobia. We are saying it's okay to put someone down by calling them gay and meaning it in a pejorative sense. We are saying it's okay to bully gay and lesbian students. We are saying homophobia is okay. This has to change but I don't know how we go about making this change".

Deputy Principal

4.1.2 Addressing the Needs of Vulnerable Students

A second area of concern for participants centred on their capacity to support students who they perceived to be potentially vulnerable either because they were perceived to be lesbian or gay or because they were questioning their sexual orientation. Many spoke about their fears in dealing with students in these circumstances and felt that they did not have the capacity to effectively meet their needs. In fact many had participated in the research because they wanted to obtain guidance and support in addressing the needs of vulnerable students around sexual orientation issues.

The example of a young person questioning their sexual orientation was of particular concern to some participants who felt that their lack of understanding of the issues involved was a barrier to how they responded.

I'd be concerned about one student who may be questioning their sexual orientation but she hasn't been able to say it. The question arises for me; do you give them the opportunity or back-off and say nothing? I'd be concerned that if you were too overt – you don't want to talk people into thinking their gay if they're not.

Principal

I spoke to the guidance counsellor in schools and she felt that there were some students struggling with sexual orientation, but not saying it.

Assistant Principal

It was recognised by some participants that effectively addressing homophobic bullying involves providing direct personal support to the vulnerable young person being targeted which may bring up sexual orientation issues. As with other issues considered sensitive, participants felt that school staff were often anxious about dealing with a young person in instances where the young person was perceived to be LGB. The inclusion of parents presented an additional challenge to this situation.

There was a student perceived to be gay. ., who was the victim of name calling. Notes were getting passed between students about the pupil and saying stuff like "I'm not sitting beside a gay person". We dealt with it through SPHE, we spoke individually to those involved, but it hasn't gone away.

There must be a better way for us to deal with it. It has invaded the class, for the entire year. We just haven't sorted it really well. They are targeting him. We haven't approached him, we couldn't, I presume, suggest to him at all that he might be gay? We don't know if his parents are aware of it.

Deputy Principal

Some participants spoke about the difficult bind they found themselves in, on the one hand wanting to support a young person who may be in the process of coming out, while on the other hand

I've no experience with a kid coming out, but I can imagine that you can make the student withdraw further, maybe even towards suicide if you say the wrong thing. What if I contributed to that? I'd rather say nothing than say the wrong thing?

Year Head

4.1.3 Visibility of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Students

The third theme that arose within the focus groups related to students themselves being 'out' and the challenges this presented to school staff. In contrast to the need to support vulnerable students in the process of coming out; when it came to students being 'out' most people spoke about the need to also support school staff in dealing with their own discomfort or lack of familiarity with the issues. Participants spoke of LGB students openly in on-going same-sex relationships (including situations of relationship breakdown); students bringing a partner of the same-sex to debs, and students being 'out' in a general sense while at school.

One school highlighted the difficulties that can arise as a result of relationships between students within the school community, in this case the breakdown of a same-sex relationship between two students.

We had a particular issue in our school: two girls were in relationship and were inseparable; they broke up and their mothers became involved so it became a major issue in the school. One girl stopped attending; we eventually dealt with it through the guidance teachers working with both parents and the school completion programme.

Principal

A number of schools spoke about the discomfort felt by some staff where students were open about their sexual orientation, and the difference in approach and attitude to the issue of students and of staff.

We have a senior student who came out recently. His friends were hugely supportive and he was overwhelmed by his fellow students' support. He got a lot of comfort from his friends' respect and support. But it seemed to be the adults who might have had the problem.

Deputy Principal

A small number of schools had experience of students bringing same-sex partners to the debs. As with the example of students being out more generally, it raised . discomfort for some staff members.

Two girls went to the debs together in our school. The students were totally fine with it. One student said to me she thought it was weird that none of the teachers said anything, like they thought it wasn't right. Not talking about it openly gives young people a bad message; that there is something wrong with being gay and that homophobia from teachers and students is okay.

Assistant Principal

Practice from one school showed that putting in place effective policy and programmes gave young lesbian and gay people, previously invisible, the confidence to be open about their sexual orientation.

A team of eight staff worked together for eight weeks and ran a programme to highlight awareness of the issues of LGB students and homophobia. Twelve students came out during that eight week programme and it was great for their parents and for them. They got the message clearly from our school 'Its okay to be gay and we want to support and protect you'.

SPHE Coordinator

4.1.4 SPHE Curriculum

The role of SPHE was specifically identified by all participants as playing a significant role in the overall development of students. While schools differed in how they presented their SPHE programme, there was an emerging sense that where issues relating to sexual orientation and specifically in relation to homosexuality were named it could contribute to an overall culture of support in the school for LGB students.

Many schools clearly name sexual orientation as part of their SPHE and RSE curriculum, but few provide any detail of content to be followed by teachers.. Where there was specific mention as part of the curriculum it was generally under the area of human sexuality but not necessarily under the area of relationships. Some policy statements note, for example '*information on and sensitivity to sexual orientation*' at junior cycle, and '*an awareness and understanding of sexual orientation*' at senior cycle.

SPHE would appear to be making a more significant or explicit contribution where there is a commitment at management level and where there is a team of teachers who are confident in addressing issues relating to sexual orientation.

I asked the question 'Are we doing RSE properly? In response I organised a number of teachers to be trained. We use a team teaching approach to SPHE for seniors. The school went on to design and deliver a programme for SPHE at senior cycle which brought all students together and which was taught by a team of teachers who planned and co-delivered aspects of the programme.

Principal

4.2 Challenges for Schools

A small number of schools had developed positive inclusive policy and practice with regard to dealing with sexual orientation issues. However the majority of schools participating acknowledged that they are struggling to address many of these issues. Many sought guidance and direction on how they can effectively address homophobic bullying, how they can meet the needs of vulnerable students and how they can support students who are open about their sexual orientation. A number of challenges were raised by school personnel, these are summarised below:

4.2.1 Developing an Understanding of the Issues.

Most focus group participants expressed some concern in relation to their level of understanding of the issues facing LGB people. Some also noted the lack of comfort and confidence some teachers had in addressing sexuality in general, but sexual orientation in particular, openly in their classes.

With regard to knowledge and understanding the issues many participants raised basic questions, for example:

- Whether lesbian, gay or bisexual orientation was a choice?
- At what age would someone know their sexual orientation?
- How can one support those who are questioning or confused?

Lack of knowledge, understanding and training were seen by some as contributing significantly to a silence around issues of sexual orientation in general but more importantly to a lack of any open in-school or curricular support, such as in SPHE, for lesbian or gay students.

Young people are usually totally okay with someone being gay [except the homophobic bullies]. Often it's the adults who have a problem. Some teachers in the school were saying, 'how can someone know for sure at that age that they are gay', but no teacher questions students identifying as heterosexual at the same age. Adults can put barriers in the way of young gay and lesbian students. And that's not supporting them or protecting them.

Deputy Principal

Many teachers and principals felt that a lack of knowledge and awareness contributed to fears that discussing issues of sexual orientation may have negative consequences for individual students, for teachers, or for relationships between the school and its trustees or with parents.

The fear of breaking the silence is well founded. We need to know what it's like to be a young gay person in our school and in our society; given the negative attitudes, bullying and homophobia. I think people think it's like suicide. People fear that if you talk about it you will put ideas in people's heads but that's not true. Someone is either gay or they are not. You can't make someone gay by discussing it in a classroom. The issue needs to be dealt with. It needs to be talked about. Schools and management and staff and students all need to know more about LGB issues. It needs to be spoken about because that will help.

Guidance Counsellor

4.2.2 Developing Professional Capacity

In general, teachers felt ill-equipped to address the issues of sexual orientation as they related to the school context. Some teachers and principals stated that while they felt very competent and confident to deal with bullying on other grounds, they did not have the capacity to deal with homophobic bullying. Guidance and training were identified as key elements in developing this capacity.

Many teachers saw training as being essential for particular teachers, for example, those teaching SPHE and the school guidance counsellor. However, many also noted the need for general staff awareness raising and training.

The challenge is supporting young people to be themselves. Training is necessary to support young people to 'find who they are', it is vital. Training has to respond to the different ages/levels and confidence to deal with the broader area of sexuality and also sexual orientation.

Assistant Principal

Participants noted that there was often the perception that addressing homophobic bullying was the role of one particular teacher, for example the SPHE teacher or Guidance Counsellor, rather than all teachers having a role.

Staff ignore homophobic bullying because they assume it will be dealt with by someone else, somewhere else, like SPHE. Staff need to learn the skills for responding appropriately to the problem of homophobia in schools and dealing effectively with LGB students and issues.

Guidance Counsellor

It was noted also that teaching about sexuality in general, and sexual orientation in particular, can become the responsibility of a very small number of teachers rather than being seen as an area that all staff should address when and where it is appropriate.

Schools operate in departments and individuals have their own roles – there's the role of the teacher of SPHE but also there's the rest of the school community and the need for awareness at different levels.

Assistant Principal

In our school there are a group of teachers who are very reluctant to get involved in pastoral issues, but they would be open and supportive about supporting those members of staff who have a pastoral responsibility to do their work. Only one of the 5 year heads would be comfortable in dealing with the issue. They would want to see the children supported, but they wouldn't feel its part of their job.

Guidance Counsellor

4.2.3 The Role of Parents

As outlined earlier dealing with homophobic bullying can be an extremely difficult and sensitive issue for school personnel. The unknown position of the parents in relation to the child's sexual orientation added a particular anxiety for school personnel which might not be present in other bullying situations.

Other participants raised more general points about not knowing how parents might respond to particular issues and how they are addressed in school. Some parents, it was felt, might be reluctant to have issues of sexual orientation addressed in schools, whereas others would want those issues to be addressed openly in the school.

In rural Ireland if someone came out in school or was open about it, or the school dealt with it explicitly there would be war, especially from parents.

Principal

I'd hate if a parent came up to me to say that the SPHE teacher was promoting homosexuality, misunderstanding the nature of SPHE. The teachers are very careful and I am also.

Principal

4.2.4 School Ethos

Almost all teachers noted that there was a lack of clarity on the general school approach to dealing with sexual orientation issues, or a whole school approach. Some were unsure how issues of sexual orientation related to the school ethos. Many participants recognised this as limiting their response to the issues as they arose, and was a barrier to responding positively to students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or unsure of their sexual orientation. Schools sometimes were very cautious, which could create a silence around the issues, and therefore could risk isolating those who were lesbian or gay further.

I'm a bit anxious about how to deal with kids coming out. I'm aware of some examples of homophobic bullying. I'm caught piggy in the middle in implementing church laws on the one hand and Irish law on the other. I want to know how to handle issues in as delicate a manner as possible.

Principal

Our religious ethos is very strong. RSE policy and letters go to parents and they have an opportunity to withdraw their students. I have a real sense that the topics are only being dealt with in a haphazard way. I want training and up-skilling on how to deal with issues in a real meaningful way. We want to take the lid off it.

Deputy Principal

4.2.5 The Role of Boards of Management and Trustees

Principals particularly, but in general all participants suggested that Board of Management and Trustees are extremely important in giving leadership and direction to schools in making sure that school policy and practice explicitly deal with homophobic bullying and in developing the capacity to respond to issues of sexual orientation as they arise in the school. Similarly, participants also referred to the important leadership role played by other key education stakeholders.

The Principal and Board of Management are so important in terms of the leadership role they can take.

Assistant Principal/Guidance Counsellor

We need the Department of Education and others like the National Parents' Council and unions to show their leadership by putting LGB on the agenda and addressing the issue properly.

Deputy Principal

5. KEY FINDINGS FROM CONSULTATIONS WITH STAKEHOLDERS

Discussions about the outcomes of the research with participating schools were held with school management bodies (JMB and IVEA), teacher unions (TUI and ASTI), education support bodies (LDS, NAPD, SPHE Support Service), the National Parents Council (post-primary), Catholic Church representatives and representatives of the Department of Education and Science.

The issues raised by those consulted were:

- The prevalence of homophobic bullying and its impact on all students. The finding that there appears to be a high incidence of such bullying in some schools was a matter of particular worry.
- The impact of perceptions about the obligation of denominational schools to uphold religious ethos and lack of clarity among school personnel about the position of church bodies on positively including students who identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual.
- It was noted that some school personnel were concerned about being inclusive of those who are gay, lesbian or bisexual for fear of acting contrary to some religious views or teachings.
- The lack of awareness by school personnel of the obligations on schools under the equality legislation was also noted.
- The capacity of teachers to address issues relating to sexual orientation. It was noted that many Irish adults are uncomfortable with any issues relating to sexuality. It was also noted that young people tend to be more comfortable than adults with such issues.
- The differences between schools in terms of readiness to address issues relating to sexual orientation. It was noted that strong negative voices at local level can prevent initiatives being developed or put into practice.
- The key role of parents at both local and national levels in supporting positive inclusion of those who are gay, lesbian and bisexual in post-primary schools.
- The silence surrounding issues relating to sexual orientation. It was noted that this invisibility was related partly to discomfort around issues of sexuality in general, partly to confusion regarding obligations to support school ethos, partly because post-primary school students (especially those in junior cycle) were deemed to be too young to be aware of sexual orientation issues and partly because there was a sense that parents might complain.

6. AREAS FOR CONSIDERATION FOR FUTURE ACTION

The focus groups and national stakeholders consulted identified a number of challenges but also a number of opportunities which could provide the basis for future action to make schools safe and inclusive learning environments for lesbian, gay and bisexual students.

The final seminar will provide an opportunity to discuss these opportunities:

- Good practice guidelines could provide concrete practical help to address knowledge gaps and build the capacity of schools.
- Training for teachers and school leaders could help to create a greater awareness of and sensitivity to homophobic bullying and sexual orientation in a school context.
- Religious bodies play a major role and could give clear guidance and direction for schools to deal effectively with homophobic bullying to make schools safe and inclusive learning environments for all students, regardless of sexual orientation.
- Parents bodies, and Religious bodies, both nationally and locally, could provide significant support to schools in their efforts to address issues such as homophobic bullying and the development of positive inclusive practices regarding lesbian, gay and bisexual students.
- School policies, procedures and practices could be reviewed to explicitly include sexual orientation as appropriate, and could also include the other eight grounds named in the equality legislation, as appropriate.

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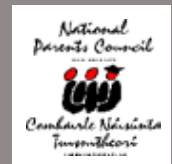
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