

A Survey of Teachers
on
Homophobic Bullying
in Irish Second-Level Schools



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Introduction

It is now generally accepted that bullying is a reality in most societies (Roland and Munthe, 1989) and Irish society is no exception (Byrne, 1993, p.18). Some research has shown that those who are perceived as weak or different in society are more prone to being bullied (Byrne, 1993, p. 28). Therefore, in Irish schools, pupils who are perceived as gay or lesbian by others are often the targets of school bullies. This type of bullying has been termed as *homophobic*¹ and is said to have taken place:

...where general bullying behaviour such as verbal and physical abuse and intimidation is accompanied by or consists of the use of terms such as gay, lesbian, queer or lezzie by perpetrators.

(Douglas et al, 1997, p.12)

Recent publications, including the Report of the Equality Authority *Implementing Equality for Lesbian, Gays and Bisexuals* (2002), highlight the "dearth" of local materials and pertinent data on the experiences of gay and lesbian people in Ireland and particularly in education (p.40). Furthermore, in their publication *Equality and Power in Schools*, Kathleen Lynch and Anne Lodge (2002) conclude that gay and lesbian pupils are amongst the most invisible people in Irish schools (p.136). However, it is also important to note that homophobic bullying affects all children not just those who may be gay or lesbian. Kehily (2001) describes the "pervasive presence of homophobia in interactions between young men and to a lesser extent young women". Homophobic jokes, banter, and abuse featured regularly in male peer groups and she found that "the potentially emasculating experience of being called gay haunted young men in school and identified certain boys as *different*" (p. 121-123).

Consequently, it can be said that if Irish schools are to protect all young people and promote equality in education, there is a need to engage in further research into the phenomenon of homophobic bullying in Irish schools. The purpose of this report is to outline the results of a survey conducted at Dublin City University in 2004. The aim of the research was to discover the attitudes of SPHE teachers on the topic of homophobic bullying.

¹ Homophobia is the fear of being labelled homosexual and/or the fear, dislike or hatred of gay males and lesbians (cf. Weinberg, 1972).

Methodology

The debate on homosexuality has for the most part been characterised by two main arguments, the “social constructivist” argument and the “essentialist” argument. While both perspectives agree that the phenomenon of homosexuality exists, and sexual orientation is experienced as unchangeable the main difference between the two arguments is concerned with knowledge; in other words how we come to know anything about the causes of the homosexual condition.

Social constructivists hold the view that sexuality is something that is constructed and can be deconstructed and reconstructed, through discourse, while for the essentialist, sexuality is innate and is then discovered, repressed, suppressed and recovered through personal history and experience (Norton, 2002). Furthermore, social constructivists, believe that homosexual cultures, and associated with this, the awareness and possibility of living a particular lifestyle, have emerged and disappeared again over the centuries as a result of specific social developments (Leupp, 1995, p. 200). The essentialists on the other hand maintain that homosexual human beings have always existed and that homosexuals are born with their sexuality already established.

For the purpose of this study it is enough for us to be aware that the debate between social constructivists and essentialists continues. While there have been some scientific developments that have strengthened the essentialist argument (Blanchard, 2001), it is also impossible to ignore the changing patterns of homosexual behaviour throughout the centuries.

In summary, this research is not concerned with why people are lesbian or gay, but accepts, for now, that there are people who experience themselves as lesbian, gay or bisexual and that it is possible to gather data about how this phenomenon is viewed in Irish second-level schools by SPHE teachers.

Social, Personal and Health Education in Ireland (SPHE)

Social, Personal and Health education had previously existed in different forms in many Irish schools as a stand-alone programme from the late 1970s – sometimes it was called *Pastoral Care*, *Lifeskills* or the *Tutorial* programme. In more recent times it has been standardised by the Department of Education and Science (2000) when a new national Junior Cycle (12-15 years) curriculum was introduced for all schools. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is currently working on the development of a senior cycle curriculum.

The SPHE curriculum for Junior Cycle was described in its introduction as an 'enabling' curriculum, allowing each school to develop its own local programme around the national guidelines and the provision of in-service and a set of resources (*SPHE Guidelines for Teachers*, 2002, p.2). The general aims of the SPHE curriculum are:

- To enable the students to develop skills for self-fulfillment and living in communities
- To promote self-esteem and self-confidence
- To enable the students to develop a framework for responsible decision-making
- To provide opportunities for reflection and discussion
- To promote physical, mental and emotional health and well-being.

(*SPHE, Junior Cycle*, 2000, p.4).

Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is a component of the new Junior Cycle SPHE Curriculum and is also offered at Senior Cycle as a distinct curriculum sometimes taught by Religious Education teachers or teachers of other subjects.

Homophobic Bullying

Studies have shown that the daily worlds of our schools teach scripts for what is considered to be appropriate gender behaviour during adolescence and later on in adulthood (Mac an Ghail, 1994, Sheridan, 1995). There has also been considerable research into the culture of masculinity and its significance for the existence of homophobia and how masculine culture can shape school relations

(Epstein and Johnson, 1994; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Redman, 1994; Kehily and Nayak, 1996, Plummer, 1999) and overall there seems to be a consensus that young men tend to develop negative attitudes toward homosexuality as a core dimension to their achieving a masculine identity (Nayak and Kehily, 1997) or as part of their initiation into manhood (Plummer, 1999). In other words homophobia has been shown to be a negative consequence of gender role stereotyping.

Studies in the USA have found that 45% of gay males and 20% of lesbians experience verbal or physical abuse in school due to other pupils' perceptions of their sexual identity. Furthermore, 28% of those harassed eventually drop out of the educational system (Telljohann and Price, 1993). In a Massachusetts study, 97% of high school pupils said they heard homophobic remarks from other pupils at school, and 53% reported hearing these remarks from school staff (Governors Commission, 1993). Lesbian and gay youth are more than four times more likely to have been threatened with a weapon at school and they are four times more likely to miss school because of safety concerns (Blumenfeld, 2000, p.262).

Other studies in the UK show that while 68% of the general school going population has suffered from bullying at some time in school (Elliot and Kilpatrick, 1994, p.27), a higher number of gay and lesbian pupils (80%) have experienced name calling and 69% have experienced open ridicule by other pupils and occasionally teachers (Rivers, 1996, p.19). The effect of bullying includes loss of confidence, diminished self-esteem, a reduced ability in academic work and even early school leaving.²

While the RSE resource materials for Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle do include lessons aimed at increasing student awareness of discrimination with a view to encouraging respect for different sexual orientations³, the question still remains, as to how effective the SPHE and RSE programmes are where homophobic bullying is concerned. However, it is important to note that the full implementation of SPHE or RSE in any school relies on a supportive environment in which parents, staff and the whole school community is engaged in the ongoing development of policy. Clearly, school ethos is an important dimension in this process (Greene, 2004, p.138) and it is also important to note that responsibility for the development of a safe and equal environment in schools does not rest alone with SPHE or RSE but with the whole school curriculum and those who manage and deliver it.

² Previous research on homophobia in education in Ireland has been conducted at third-level by the USI.

³ Junior Cycle RSE Resource Materials, p. 230 and Senior Cycle RSE Resource Materials, p. 152.

Research Methods

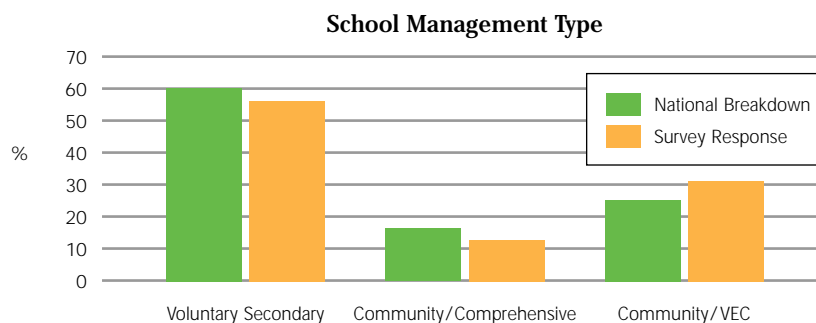
The study was aimed at finding out to what extent teachers are aware of, and willing to address, through the SPHE curriculum the issue of homophobic bullying. In order to find out this information it was important that the research was carried out in a manner that would encourage teachers to participate and be open about their willingness to deal with the issues mentioned above.

For these reasons, this study relied mainly on a quantitative methodology in the form of a postal survey questionnaire for teachers, supported by qualitative data gathered by means of a message board on a dedicated website. Here teachers who participated in the study were invited to make their views known on the issues raised in the survey.⁴ It was hoped that the message board would provide a virtual focus group, which would allow for data of a more qualitative kind.

Research Findings

Seven hundred and five questionnaires were sent to SPHE Coordinators/teachers in all schools who are engaged with the National SPHE support service. Fifty-two per cent (365) of these responded to the survey. Overall the respondents to this survey reasonably represent proportionately the various types of second-level schools in Ireland in that the largest group (56%) of respondents came from those who worked in a voluntary secondary school and these schools make up the largest sector of second-level schools in Ireland (graph one).

Graph One: **Respondent's School by Management Type**



⁴ www.schoolingsexualities.ie

The remaining 44% of the teachers who responded to the survey worked in schools, which can be loosely described as belonging to the public sector (graph one).

POLICIES

Overall, 98% of teachers reported that their school had a policy on behaviour and discipline and 93% of teachers said that their school had an anti-bullying policy. Schools in urban areas were statistically more likely to have an anti-bullying policy than those in rural areas. The reason for this difference may be attributed to the fact that some schools in urban areas tend to have a higher concentration of pupils with social problems than those in rural areas and so they are more likely to develop such policies. However, 90% of teachers reported that their school's anti-bullying policy did not include any reference to lesbian and gay related bullying.

Table One: **Respondent's school policy on bullying including reference to lesbian and gay bullying.**

Reference to lesbian and gay related bullying?		
	Frequency	%
Yes	32	10
No	288	90

96% of teachers reported that their school timetabled SPHE in their curriculum, however, 31% of teachers said that their school had failed to meet the requirement to put an RSE policy in place. This figure rises to 36% in boys' single-sex schools and 45% of respondents in voluntary secondary schools generally. Among the schools with an RSE policy, 63% of teachers reported that their school's policy did not include any reference to lesbian or gay related issues. This increases to 75% in girls' single-sex schools and reduces to 48% of respondents in boys' single-sex schools.

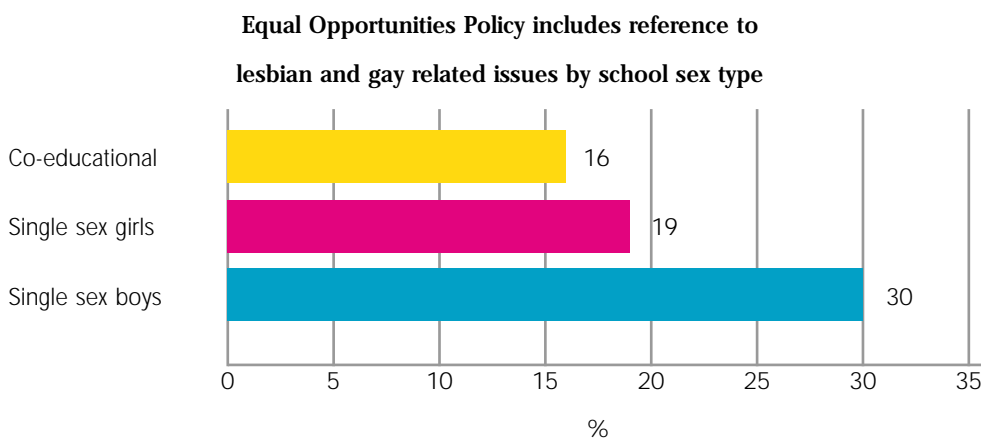
Table Two: **Reference to Lesbian and Gay issues in RSE Policy**

School sex type	RSE policy include information on lesbian and gay related issues?			All
		Yes	No	
Single sex boys	N	21	19	40
	%	53	48	100
Single sex girls	N	13	38	51
	%	25	75	100
Co-educational	N	50	85	135
	%	37	63	100
Total	N	84	142	226
	%	37	63	100

On the other hand, 69% of teachers reported that their schools RSE policy did allow opportunities for discussion about gay or lesbian issues. However, a significant number of teachers in female single-sex schools (43%) said that this was not the case, with co-educational schools most likely (72%) to include opportunities for discussion about gay and lesbian related issues.

36% of the teachers in this survey reported that their school had a policy on equal opportunities. Again boys' single-sex schools were most likely (40%) to have such a policy and girls' single-sex schools were the least likely (26%) to have a policy on equal opportunities. Of those who had an equality policy only 20% included reference to lesbian and gay issues.

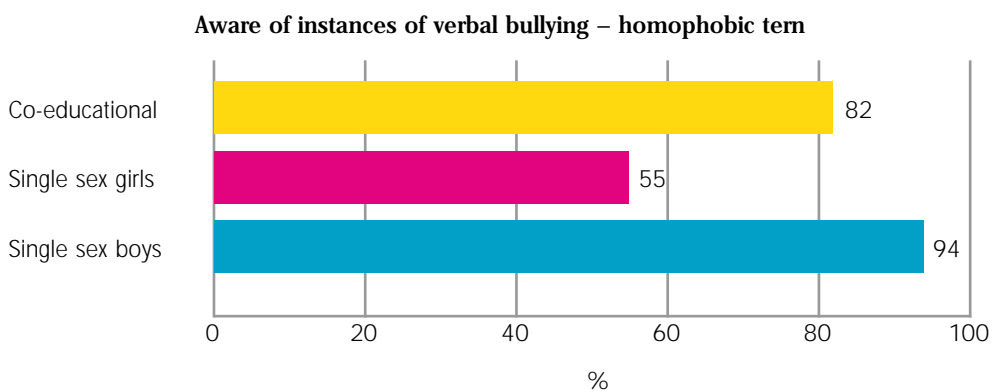
Graph Three: **Policy on Equal Opportunities includes Reference to Lesbian and Gay issues.**



HOMOPHOBIC BULLYING

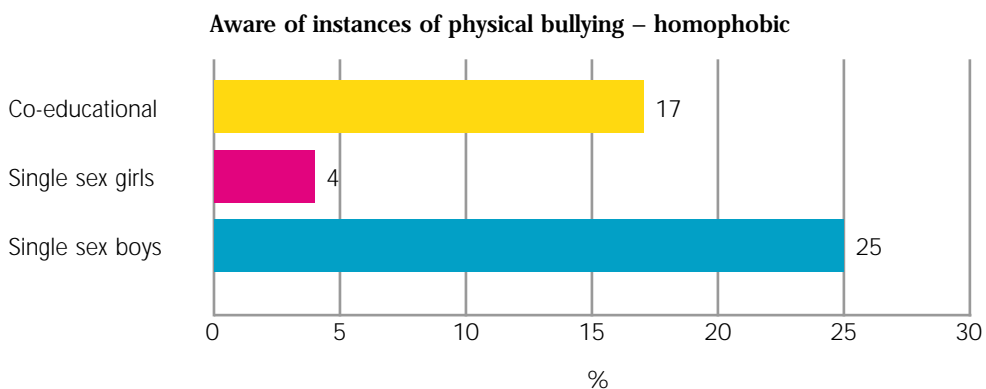
The number of teachers who were aware of instances of verbal bullying where homophobic terms were used was quite high at 79% and 30% of these had encountered this type of bullying on more than ten occasions during the last term in which the survey was carried out. The figure is much higher in boys' single-sex (94%) and co-educational schools (82%) with teachers in girls' single-sex schools least likely (55%) to encounter verbal bullying of a homophobic nature.

Graph Four: **Homophobic Verbal Bullying.**



In relation to instances of physical bullying as a result of pupils' perceptions of homosexuality, 16% of teachers said that they were aware of this type of bullying in their school with a higher number in boys' single-sex (25%) and co-educational (17%) schools. Male teachers were also statistically more likely (27%) to be aware of this type of bullying when compared with their female counterparts (13%).

Graph Five: **Homophobic Physical Bullying**

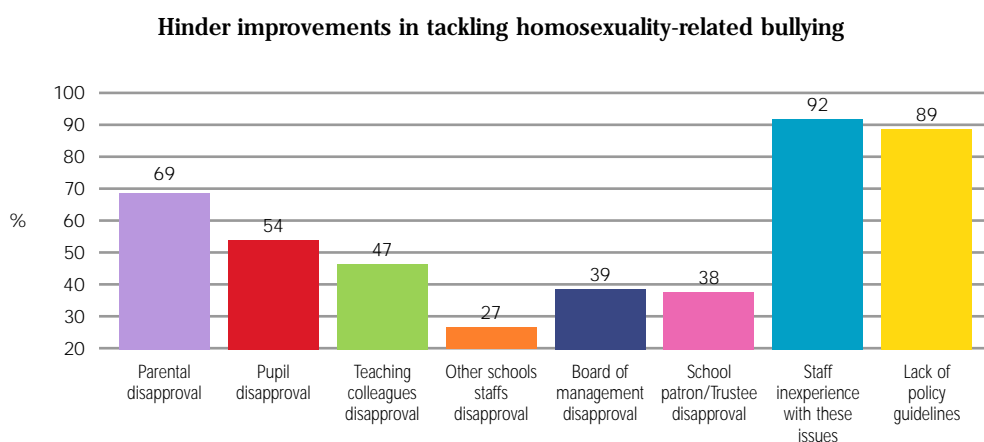


Of those teachers who were aware of physical homophobic bullying, 87% had encountered this type of bullying on more than one occasion in the last school term; while 41% of teachers said that they found it more difficult to deal with homosexuality related bullying in their school than with other types of bullying. Teachers reported that their desire to help in this situation was hindered by a desire to be sensitive to the victim and a fear of a possible negative reaction from parents, other staff and pupils if they are seen to act to protect the pupil who is perceived to be lesbian or gay.

Sixty-four per cent of teachers said that they thought their school is an appropriate setting where information about lesbian and gay issues could be made available to pupils. When specifically asked what might hinder improvements in dealing with lesbian and gay related issues, they identified staff inexperience in dealing with these issues (92%) as a reason that would hinder any positive development; this was followed by the lack of any formal policy or guidelines (89%) and their fear of parental disapproval (69%) if they were to make improvements in this area. Others reported that pupil disapproval (54%), teaching colleagues' disapproval (47%), board of management disapproval (39%), and 38% said that they believed that the disapproval of the school's trustees/patron would hinder improvements in this area. Teachers in rural schools were statistically more likely to fear the disapproval of their board of management as a hindrance to improving their work on homophobic bullying than their counterparts in urban schools.

When asked to suggest what might support their schools work in addressing homophobic bullying teachers identified more training and policy as their key requirements. Female teachers were particularly concerned with their lack of experience in this area and the need for policy and guidelines.

Graph Six: **Hindrances to improving lesbian and gay education**



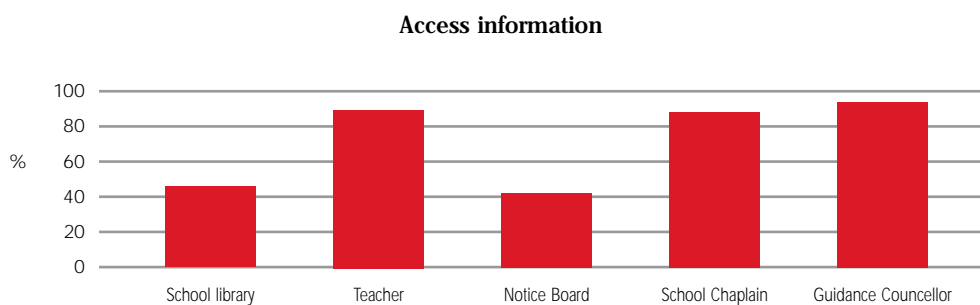
It is interesting to note that those who said their school was not an appropriate setting where information about lesbian and gay issues could be made available to pupils also highlighted staff inexperience with these issues, lack of policy and fear of parental disapproval as their reasons why their school was not an appropriate setting for giving information about gay and lesbian issues.

INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

Fifty-one per cent of teachers who responded to the survey said that they were aware of lesbian and gay pupils attending their schools. This figure increased in boys' single-sex schools to 66% and was 51% in co-educational schools, although it decreases in girls' single-sex schools to 37% of teachers ever having known a lesbian pupil. Only 18% of teachers in this study said that a pupil seeking to discuss his/her being lesbian or gay had ever approached them, while 15% of the respondents were also aware that a colleague had been approached for the same reasons. Teachers in urban schools were statistically more likely to have known a colleague or been approached themselves by a lesbian or gay pupil. Of those who had been approached by a pupil themselves 89% of them said that they were able to provide information about a service to go to for further information and 74% said that their colleagues were able to provide this type of information. It seems that those teachers who have been approached in boys' single-sex schools were better prepared to provide this type of information with 80% of teachers in this type of school reported that their colleagues were able to offer this type of support compared to only 57% in girls' single-sex schools and 75% of colleagues in co-educational schools.

Only 37% of teachers said their school had some information available about lesbian, gay and bisexual issues. For the most part this information was available through the Guidance Counsellor (94%), the School Chaplain (87%) or another teacher (90%) as well as in the school library (46%) and on a notice board (41%).

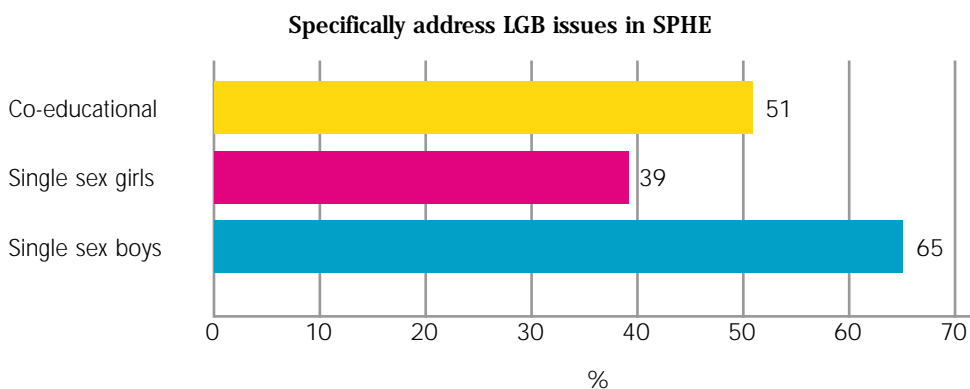
Graph Seven: **Where support is available**



SPHE AND HOMOSEXUALITY

52% of teachers who responded reported that homosexuality and bisexuality are addressed as part of the SPHE curriculum in their school, with a higher number (65%) of boys' single-sex schools and the lowest number (39%) in girls' single-sex schools including these issues in their SPHE curriculum. Male respondents were also more likely to report that these issues were included in their SPHE curriculum. Almost half (49%) of the SPHE teachers reported that homosexuality and bisexuality are not addressed as part of the SPHE curriculum in their school. When asked to explain why these issues are not addressed in their school's SPHE curriculum many teachers reported that SPHE was only offered at Junior Cycle (and therefore it might not be age appropriate) or that there were so few classes in SPHE that they had to prioritise which topics to address. The lack of policy and staff experience in this area was also mentioned.

Graph Eight: **Homosexuality and bisexuality as part of SPHE**



WEBSITE MESSAGE BOARD DATA AND CONTENT ANALYSIS

The survey included information about a website which was set up specifically to support the research project through a) the provision of some information and links on sexual orientation and homophobia for teachers and b) the provision of a message board where teachers who took part in the survey were invited to contribute to an on-line discussion about the issues effecting gay and lesbian pupils in Irish second-level schools. Due to the public nature of the website and the desire to allow people to contribute to the message board anonymously it was not possible to limit the contributions to those who took part in the questionnaire alone. Consequently, anyone who was interested in these issues was invited to participate on the message board. There were

41 contributions to the website.⁵ The content of the contributions was analysed and organised into the following two main categories of *legal issues* and *pastoral issues*.

Legal Issues refers to those contributions to the message board that for the most part came from those who identified themselves as gay and lesbian teachers in which they expressed their fears about being a lesbian or gay teacher and working particularly in a Catholic school. Several of them referred to Section 37 of the Employment Equality Act (1998), which says that such organisations “shall not be taken to discriminate...” against employees whom they act against in order to protect the *ethos* of the organisation. The Act allows an institution to take action “which is reasonably necessary to prevent an employee or prospective employee from undermining the religious ethos of the institution”.

It is unclear if simply being homosexual would be something that a school might use as grounds to dismiss a teacher not to mention the fact that there is a legal duty on schools and those who are in positions of responsibility in schools not to permit pupils or staff to be harassed by other pupils or staff. However, it appears that there is a perception amongst some lesbian and gay teachers that this section of the Employment Equality Act could be used against them if their sexual orientation was to be known by school management, colleagues or parents.

These contributions to the message board reflect the findings of another study conducted by Ó Fathaigh (2003) which found that “fear of being outed” was a recurring theme among lesbian and gay teachers in Ireland and that many of these people “actively manage” their identity in school (p.148) so as to avoid possible discrimination in their work place.

Pastoral Issues mostly arose in the form of contributions from pupils and former pupils relaying accounts of how they were treated by teachers and others, including parents, when they were in second-level school as a result of being lesbian or gay. This type of contribution has been designated as *pastoral issues* because the contributors related how their sexuality affected their relationships with teachers and other pupils in the school. Some of the contributors reported that they felt hurt, unsupported and sometimes even rejected by their schools because of their homosexuality.

⁵ Four messages were removed after they were deemed not to be relevant to the purpose of the website.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This report set out to outline the responses of SPHE teachers to homophobic bullying in Irish second-level schools. It was intended that this study should reveal to what extent SPHE teachers as a professional group in Irish education are aware of and are addressing the problem of homophobic bullying and that this would give an indication of the wider experience of teachers in Irish second-level schools.

It is clear from the findings in this study that there is a significant problem with homophobic bullying in Irish second-level schools and that teachers of SPHE are aware of this problem. The data also reveals that homophobic bullying is a bigger problem in boys' single sex schools and co-educational schools, where male cultures dominate, than it is in girls' single sex-schools. The reason why boys' schools and co-educational schools are more homophobic than girls' schools can be explained in the light of the literature outlined earlier on how young men have been found in international studies to develop negative attitudes toward homosexuality as a result of their perceptions of appropriate gender behaviour for males (Nayak and Kehily, 1997; Plummer, 1999).

The findings of this study in this regard highlight the need for further work with young male pupils regarding gender and sex role perceptions; the possible contribution of the *Exploring Masculinities* programme is clear here.⁶

It stands to reason that homophobic bullying cannot be addressed unless schools include information on sexual orientation in other programmes, rather than just in SPHE and RSE. The majority of teachers in this study reported that they believed school was an appropriate setting in which to make information about gay and lesbian issues available. However, they also identified staff inexperience in dealing with these issues, lack of policy and guidelines, and parental disapproval as the main hindrances to improving their work in this area.

Consequently, there will have to be an increase in the provision of in-service training for teachers on how to address bullying based on homophobia in their schools. Although the national SPHE support service is already involved in the provision of such training the evidence from the

⁶ *Exploring Masculinities* is a programme developed and aimed at single-sex boys schools.

teachers highlights the need for further training. Furthermore, parallel work will need to be done with parents on the responsibility of the school to protect young people from this type of bullying. The remit of the SPHE National Support service could be expanded to do this.

Given that almost two thirds of teachers (64%) reported that their school did not have an equal opportunities policy, it may be necessary for the Department of Education & Science to require schools to comply with a national policy on equality for parents, teachers, pupils and others that would include reference to protection from bullying on the grounds of sexual orientation in Irish schools. The presence of such a policy would serve to enable teachers to take action to protect themselves and their pupils from harassment related to sexual orientation. The Department of Education & Science has already issued a booklet entitled *Schools and the Equal Status Act (2003)* but so far this does not seem to have made a significant impression on the respondents schools.

The fact that so many teachers highlighted parental disapproval as a hindrance to improving their work in this area reveals a possible lack of communication between parents and teachers as a previous national study found that 96% of parents believed that it was important to include 'understanding sexual orientation' as a topic in the RSE curriculum (Morgan, 2000). It is clear that there is a need for further research into the views of parents as well as school management, teachers and even pupils in order to develop an agreed approach for addressing the problem of homophobic bullying in schools.

Finally, if schools are to promote in a real way the social and personal development of pupils, it is essential that they first ensure that all pupils are safe and free from harassment of any kind including that which is based on perceptions of sexual orientation.

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