

Still Catching up: Schools, Sexual Orientation and Homophobia in Ireland

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Abstract This paper outlines research that was conducted among students, parents, teachers and senior management teams in five high schools in the Greater Dublin area of Ireland. The research involved semi-structured interviews and observations. The findings of this research are significant in that it was the first time any data was gathered on this topic directly from those within the school system. Overall, the qualitative nature of the data allowed us to obtain an insight into how students, parents, teachers and senior management teams understand and experience homophobic bullying in their schools. The data from this study shows that the impact of not having a mainstream approach to sexual orientation within schools results in fear, negative stereotypes, and worse still discriminatory and bullying behaviour.

Keywords LGBT · Schools · Homophobic bullying · Ireland

Introduction

This study sought to examine how teachers, students, parents and senior management teams in high schools in Ireland understood and experienced homophobic bullying. The research was funded by the Gender Equality Unit of the Republic of Ireland's national Department of Education and Science and it took place during academic year 2005–2006. Apart from another published report of a more quantitative nature (O'Higgins-Norman 2008), this was the first direct study specifically on homophobic bullying to be carried out within schools in Ireland.

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Although it is a stereotype in itself, it can be said that the Irish as a social group have traditionally had an uncomfortable relationship with sex and sexuality. While it is true that this discomfort has to a large extent been lifted in recent decades and that Irish society is more accepting and open in relation to matters of a sexual nature, it is also true that within Irish schools sexuality is something that has yet to find an appropriate forum for discussion and learning.

Research has shown that for many bullying at school can result in long term social, emotional and psychological effects (Warwick et al. 2001; Johnston 2005). Those who are bullied at school can become fearful of their peer group and isolate themselves from them. The young person who is repeatedly bullied at school can experience anxiety, loss of confidence, loneliness and depression. This can result in punctuality problems, deteriorating academic attainment, poor attendance, truancy, school drop out, mental health problems and even ideas of suicide (Parker and Asher 1987; Sharp 1995; Olweus 1993; Rigby 1998; Sears 2005; Hunt and Jensen 2006).

In his survey of 15–31 year olds in Ireland Minton found that many had suffered bullying as a result of their sexuality with over a fifth of the respondents reporting that they did not feel safe on their way to and from school (2008, p. 182). Earlier studies in the USA have found that 45% of those who as adults identify themselves as gay, men and 20% of those who identify themselves as lesbians, experienced verbal or physical abuse in school due to other students' perceptions of their sexual identity. Furthermore, 28% of those so harassed eventually drop out of the educational system (Telljohan and Price 1993). In a Massachusetts study, 97% of those who were current high school pupils said that they heard homophobic remarks from other students at school, and 53% reported hearing these remarks from school staff (Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth 1993). A separate study conducted on a representative sample of 4159 9th–12th grade pupils in public high schools from Massachusetts found that those who identify themselves as lesbian and gay youth were more than four times as likely to have been threatened with a weapon at school and four times more likely than their non-gay peers to have missed school because of safety concerns (Garofalo et al. 1998). These studies concur with the findings of a recent study on the mental health of young same-sex attracted men in Northern Ireland. It found that homophobia in schools resulted in self-harm, suicide attempts, and internalised homophobia among gay men (McNamee 2006, p. 55). Another recent study in Scotland found that 26% of LGBT students felt that their schoolwork had suffered as a result of homophobic bullying while 12% had truanted because of homophobic bullying (O'Loan et al. 2006).

Masculinities has emerged as a continuing theme in the discourse around homophobia in schools (Kimmel 1987; Connell 1996; Pascoe 2007). It seems that where boys are gathered in groups a particular form of "compulsive masculinity" emerges and that this form of masculinity is characterised by a high degree of sexism and homophobia expressed through homosexual innuendos, sexual bravado and sexual one-upmanship (Kimmel 1987; Pascoe 2007). However, it would be a mistake to see this form of masculinity as encompassing the entirety of the male school going population. The research also shows that while many young males do engage in this compulsory form of masculinity, many others do reject or at least

confine their involvement with it to group scenarios. During one-to-one interviews researchers have found that most of the boys who had expressed the type of masculinity outlined above in group situations rejected it when talking alone about themselves. In fact many of them went to great lengths to explain the extent to which they were different from other guys (Pollack 2001; Pascoe 2007). It seems that in order to stave off any accusations of homosexuality boys must engage in this form of compulsive heterosexual masculinity when in groups, and central to this is homophobic and sexist language and behaviour (Pascoe 2007, p. 114).

Schooling and Identity

The culture of schools in Ireland, and teachers as part of that culture, tend to 'read' sexuality as innate, fixed and biologically determined. The contrary sociological perspective that sexual behaviour and ontology is substantially socially constructed (Kimmel 1987; Connell 1995; Pascoe 2007) is not a view that has been often considered or discussed. Furthermore, research in Ireland has shown that the majority of teachers and students perceive homosexuality as a deviation from the norm and something that is fixed within an individual (O'Higgins-Norman 2008).

McLelland illustrates that homosexuality is understood and experienced in different ways by different people in different contexts. In his biographies of sixteen homosexual men in Japan he found that these men did not necessarily share a discreet, separate gay identity. In fact, he found that some of these men had originally had relationships with women, while now they were involved sexually with men, others could not see themselves ever being involved with a woman and some said that while they planned to marry, they did not believe that they would give up having casual sexual interactions with men (2000, p. 192). These accounts serve to highlight the fluidity of understanding and expression in human sexuality.

Judith Butler (1990) argues that certain constructions of sexuality have become hegemonic and as such produce a world that feels external to most people and somewhat constraining where sexuality is concerned. Butler (1990) argued that heterosexual hegemony is a framework in which repeated heterosexual practices construct a causal relationship between gender, sex and desire, and, because this heterosexual matrix makes these causal relationships intelligible, homosexual actions become unintelligible and abnormal for most people. The construction of the heterosexual discourse is based on the repetition of its normality. By reason of these repetitions, heterosexuality is constituted as a copy, not an original:

The heterosexualisation of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between "feminine" and "masculine", where these are understood as expressive attributes of "male" and "female". The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires certain kinds of "identities" cannot "exist"- that is those in which gender does not follow from sex and those practices of desire do not follow from either sex or gender. (1990, p. 24)

Through the maintenance of the type of compulsive masculinity outlined above schools in Ireland and elsewhere can be said to play a fundamental role in maintaining this heterosexual hegemony. Pascoe argues that there is a need to refine our approaches to masculinity and especially understanding masculinity as “what men do” as this confirms biological binary concepts of male and female. Instead we need to understand masculinity as a “variety of practices and discourses that can be mobilised by and applied to both boys and girls” (Pascoe 2007, p. 9).

Schools are significant places where young people create meaning about themselves, their identities and their sexualities. The role of the teacher in the production of sexual identities is also very important. Epstein and Johnson (1998) argue that the formation of teacher identities is part of the informal curriculum both in teacher training and in schools. They go on to make the point that teachers “bear the primary responsibility for the desexualisation of schooling required by government and the dominant sexual culture” (p. 122). Consequently, if schools generally are places where students and teachers are to be desexualised, then any possibility of addressing the issue of sexual orientation is really beyond the bounds of possibility. However, while the majority of the population who consider themselves to be heterosexual have the support of the dominant sexual culture outside school and in resisting desexualisation within school, those who identify as homosexual or bi-sexual are at risk of experiencing social isolation and oppression of their sexual expression in both spheres. Furthermore, their heterosexual peers meanwhile are at risk of creating meaning around same-sex attraction that is based on stereotypes and prejudice.

Research Methodology

I was interested in exploring the experiences and understandings of students, parents, teachers and members of senior management teams in high-schools in Ireland. The research involved 100 interviews in five schools in the greater Dublin area. The schools were randomly chosen from the following categories of second-level schools in Ireland:

- denominational boys' single-sex,
- denominational girls' single-sex,
- denominational co-educational,
- public sector i.e. schools established by the State,
- fee-paying private schools.

These schools served as a cross-section of second-level schools and it was my aim to interview a randomly chosen sample of 5 students, 5 parents, 5 teachers and 5 school senior managers in each school. The students were all in senior cycle (15–17 years). I also recorded my observations on each school in terms of general atmosphere, ethos, physical environment, teacher-pupil relationships, pupil behaviour, design, decoration and so on.

Analysis of the data was guided by a constructivist grounded theory framework (Charmaz 2000) and is reflective of this more flexible approach rather than the more

narrow theory put forward by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Line-by-line coding, constant comparison, memo writing and theoretical sampling were used for analysis. Each code and its subsequent categories were defined explicitly using line-by-line coding and by comparing and grouping their corresponding properties. Memo writing assisted me with the coding throughout the analysis.

In terms of coding the data, I then read and re-read each interview script comparing what each interviewee said with the previous one and this allowed me to identify themes as they emerged from the data. I compared each interview with the previous one I noted anything that was similar between them. As each core category emerged I stopped looking for a new one and then re-read the transcripts with only one core category at a time in mind, ignoring sentences that did not relate to the core category that I was working on at the time. I also made a memo of the categories and how they might relate to each other on a separate page.

Having reviewed the transcripts of the interviews from the schools many times, a number of reoccurring themes began to emerge in how the pupils, parents, teachers and the members of the school management teams understood homosexuality generally and homophobic bullying in particular. Six primary codes or themes were identified as follows.

Theme One: Being Normal Means Being Heterosexual & Clearly Masculine or Feminine

In previous research heteronormativity has been described as the universal presumption of heterosexuality (Warner 1993; Connell 1995; Dennis 2003). In other words, it is the underlying presence of heterosexual values which are continually reproduced as the dominant sexual discourse in society causing most people to “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler 1999, p. 43). This set of beliefs and attitudes was present in most interviews in all schools, and was especially to be seen in how individuals understood people who were perceived to be different from the norm.

The teachers highlighted the way in which the students monitored the boundaries of what was considered to be normal and abnormal:

To be gay is to be different, and difference is treated with suspicion. (Teacher 1, Man, St. Colins' School)

If you are not gay you don't want to be called gay. They (the students) would look on it as not normal. (Teacher 3, Man, St. Colin's)

Parents also showed awareness of how important it was for young people to appear to be part of the 'norm' in school. This was closely connected with the pupil's perceptions of what was considered to be appropriate masculine and feminine behaviour:

There are different rates of growing up. Some (girls) have boyfriends before others do. Children are encouraged to grow up so fast, there is more

pressure...and if you are not developing (sexually) at the same rate as those around you, then you are in trouble because you will not be seen as being part of the norm. (Parent 3, Woman, St. Mary's)

Bullying goes on all of the time, anyone who is a bit different will get called names. Especially if they (a boy) are bit of feminine, maybe in their voice... for the students being gay is non-masculine, wimps, the boys don't want to accept their own feminine side. (Parent 3, Woman, St. Colins')

What the parents have to say here concurs with the findings of previous studies that have linked homophobic behaviour to narrow constructions of masculinity among adolescent boys (Mac an Ghaill 1994; Lynch and Lodge 1999; Sears 2005; Pascoe 2007).

The data from the interviews with the students in the six schools also reveals a strong heteronormative value system particularly in the boys' single-sex school:

A gay pupil would probably get a hard time around here. A few people would have problems with it, because it is different, not normal. People are slagged if they're not into football or PE, and because of the music they like. Calling someone a faggot is if they are not like a guy. (Pupil 4, Boy 16, St. Colin's)

If there were a gay kid in the school then they would get a bad time, coz they are different. We are brought up to dislike things they do, like it is "not normal" to be two guys together. Fellas would take it worse; more girls tend to be open-minded. (Pupil 3, Girl, 17, Mount View)

I took up boxing because I was slagged as being gay, which I am not, but I had to do something to make them see I wasn't. (Pupil 3, Boy, 17, St. Joseph's)

This last pupil shook his head and pulled his shoulders up as if recoiling away from something hot when declaring that he was not gay. His body language revealed not so much revulsion as a sense that to be perceived as being gay was almost dangerous.

In interviews, the school principals seemed to say that being bullied about one's sexuality was a consequence of being perceived as being different in a school:

I am aware of homophobic bullying in this school...it happens even if the boy is vaguely effeminate... they (the students) try to fit in with the norm, they are aware of what people might say if they are seen to be different. I don't think this has changed over the years. There are stereotypical notions among the boys: he is effeminate, studies, doesn't play football, he must be gay, even if this is not the case. (Principal, Man, St. Colin's)

There is a fear of being labelled as a Lesbian. (Principal, Woman, St. Anne's)

Staff as well as students who were perceived to be sexually different from the norm also risked being treated in a negative way by students and other members of staff:

It would be foolish for a teacher who is gay or lesbian to let it be known, especially among the students, they would get a hard time. (Teacher, Woman, Mount View)

However, gay staff were considered to be likely to receive less harassment from students due to the fact that they were authority figures and removed to a degree from the students:

I don't think a gay member of staff would get as much hassle from students because the teachers are more away from the students although we wouldn't like it if a teacher talks about homosexuality in class, this is because of the way we were brought up. (Pupil 1, Boy, 18, St. Joseph's)

The question then arises as to whether society creates this understanding that heterosexuality is the norm and it is brought into the school; or whether the school itself creates heteronormativity or both. The traditional argument in sociology is that schools exist for the purposes of social reproduction rather than as agents of change, but that is not to say that some principals and teachers may not have other motives and seek to produce social change where possible (Grace 2000).

Given the religious ethos of so many of Irish schools I would argue that for the most part Irish schools reproduce a great deal of the heteronormativity that is found in the churches and wider Irish society. The extent to which the heteronormativity found in schools differs from that which is found in wider society is something that would require a further study, suffice to say here, that given the ethos of most Irish schools, acceptance of diversity across remains a challenge (Lodge and Lynch 2004). The ethos of the schools in this study required students to engage in behaviour that supports a heteronormative value system. So, consequently, males were expected to act in a *manly* manner that involved pursuing females for physically intimate relationships, achieving on the sports and in academic spheres. Some female students expressed their heterosexual values in the adjustments they made to their school uniforms such as raising the hem of their skirts, wearing make-up and behaving in a demure fashion to attract males as well as engaging in activities that are traditionally associated with feminine qualities of nurturing and artistic creativity. Both males and females maintained strong friendships and associations with their own 'pack' as a base, where heteronormative values were promoted and maintained. Those who did not comply with the pack's values were then rejected and ridiculed by their peers.

Theme Two: Fear of All Things Homosexual

Fear of homosexuality was seen particularly in the things that students said as well as through boys not touching each other or girls not wanting to share a room (as a boarder) or to be too close friends with someone. The latter seemed to reveal that they thought someone who is perceived to be gay or lesbian might contaminate them: that they may be turned into a homosexual:

As a boarder it would not bother me if there were gay girls on a one-to-one basis, but I would prefer not to share a room with one of them. Not too comfortable. (Pupil 4, Girl, 16, St. Anne's)

If there were a gay pupil in the school, he would be got at. There is a fear about homosexuality and boys are less open minded. (Pupil 4, Girl 17, Mount View)

In his work on the history of the relationship between men and the modern construct of homosexual identity Ibson (2006) provides evidence for what Foucault described as the changing meaning of homosexuality from the sodomite, which was viewed as a temporary aberration to the conceptualisation of the homosexual orientation. Using every day photographs he shows how what is considered to be appropriate touching among men changed to reflect this change in meaning as described by Foucault (1987, pp. 38–43). It seems that the data from my study confirms that the young people interviewed have developed very definite personal boundaries to protect themselves from any possibility of homosexuality. Teachers also recognised that their students had a fear of being labelled as or associated with a gay or lesbian, and this was seen to impact on classroom management:

There are 'off the cuff' remarks like "don't touch me", and if there are benched seating for two people then you hear "go away from me", "he brushed against me". They are sure to make noise with the chair as they move away (from the boy/s perceived as gay). They are afraid that someone might brand them as gay; they want to be seen as macho guys. (Teacher 2, Woman, St. Colin's)

It seems girls are less hostile towards gay boys, might be accepted as an 'honorary girl'. There is a fear about gay girls...a fear of being labelled as one. (Principal, Woman, St. Anne's)

The interviews also revealed that a large part of the fear among students has to do with perceptions that (a) a gay/lesbian person will always make a sexual advance on someone of the same sex, (b) if this happens they would not know how to respond.

It is like we are women and unused to that (lesbians), I would be more uncomfortable towards lesbians because they might be attracted to me; it would change things with a friend (if found out friend was gay). (Pupil 3, Girl, 16, St. Anne's)

A lot of people would not have an open mind to this type of difference (being gay)...what happens if they are attracted to me. (Pupil 1, Boy, 18, St. Joseph's)

A related aspect was the fear of parents for the future and the well-being of their own son or daughter if they were to identify themselves as gay or lesbian. For the most part the parents stated that they would accept their son or daughter's sexuality. Their fears had to do rather with how other students, and society generally would react to them:

If I found out that my daughter was gay I would be very disappointed for her, because I know life would not treat her easily. (Parent 5, Woman, St. Anne's)

I would prefer if my son was not gay when he grows up. There is still a stigma about it, he would definitely be slagged in school, get into fights and be thumped around. (Parent 2, Woman, St. Colin's)

Several of the parents explained that they would be in favour of homosexuality being included to some degree as part of their son/daughter's education in school as this might mean that there would be less discrimination against gay and lesbian people.

The data from some of the interviews also seemed to show that there was less fear and greater acceptance of gay boys by girl students than of lesbians by boys:

People at school are more comfortable with the idea of gay guys. It is more publicised, there are gay men who are celebrities. (Pupil 3, Girl, 17, St. Anne's)

If there was a gay fella in my class, some of the other lads would feel uncomfortable around him.... (Pupil 1, Boy, 18, St. Joseph's)

Both sexes argued that lesbians might have an easier time in school because they would be less obvious than gay boys:

A gay boy is more obvious in the school...it is not as obvious for girls (lesbians) and so they probably get an easier time. (Pupil 2, Boy, 16, Mount View)

I know a gay woman...gay girls are not as obvious (as gay boys), and girls can come through school being less obvious. (Parent 1, Woman, St. Colin's)

Overall, the staff and parents in all schools agreed that the fear expressed by the students had to do with a lack of education and experience of people who were gay or lesbian. However, fear on the part of parents seemed to be rooted in a belief that gay and lesbian people are treated less well in school and society alike. Furthermore, parents did not seem to believe their children could be contaminated, that is made gay or lesbian by contact with those identified in this way. In other words, for the parents, people either were or were not homosexual, and if they were not, fine; and if they were, it was a pity but nothing could be done to change it. Parents seemed to understand sexuality as fixed with no sense of fluid sexual possibilities.

Theme Three: Limits and Negative Stereotypes of Gay Men & Lesbians

Other studies have found that stereotypes about social reference groups are highly prevalent among adolescents and adults alike (Brown 1989; Brown, Eicher and Petrie 1986, Youniss et al. 1994; Brown et al. 1994, Macrae et al. 1996). Furthermore, adolescents are also known to be influenced in their construction of knowledge and meaning by the social beliefs of their peers (Koslowski and Okagaki 1986; Moshman and Franks 1986). As far as their knowledge of gay and lesbian people was concerned, the data from this study revealed that many of the students, parents, teachers and senior management teams were equally operating out of limited stereotypes of what a gay or lesbian person was, often using stereotypes based on media characterisations:

There are gay people on television and there is a certain level of acceptance; it is not like before, it would not be that bad. (Teacher 1, Man, St. Colin's)

Will and Grace has a lot to answer for. Gay guys are seen as cool; they are not a threat (to girls), it is like having a guy who knows about being a girl. Girls cannot understand a gay woman, they are not as understanding of them, and most of the girls seen as lesbian on TV are sad or uncool. (Parent 2, Woman, St. Mary's)

Underpinning a lot of the knowledge constructed by the interview participants is a view that gay men are more feminine and fun to be with than those who are heterosexual:

I think a gay male is more in touch with himself. Gay males seem funny and they are honest (about their feelings) with you. (Pupil 2, Girl 18, St. Joseph's)

A gay guy is fun to go shopping with. They seem to be nice. (Students 1, Girl 17, St. Anne's)

Girls would like a gay fella because he would be more into fashion and shopping and how he looks. (Pupil, Boy 16, Mount View)

Although it counters the views that lesbians would be less obvious than gay men, for some of those interviewed gay women were presumed to be butch, and this image was less popular, especially among females:

Gay women are not attractive. (Pupil 1, Boy, 15, St. Colin's)

I don't understand lesbians, they pay little attention to personal hygiene, the butch ones don't really pass... get left alone by straight males and females. (Pupil 6, Girl, 17, St. Joseph's)

However, there is a counter stereotype of lesbians: boys often saw lesbians as sexy and erotic while some boys and many girls saw them as masculine and sporty.

One pupil who described himself as gay went on to say that the perception among his classmates of a gay man is of someone who is a "*limp-wristed camp fairy who hangs around with women, and is always with the girls*". Speaking of himself he said that he would hate to come across like that, which suggests that to some degree he may have internalised at least some of the homophobia he experiences around him. He also claimed that girls tend to be attracted to him and that sometimes this is because "*they want what they cannot have*". He prefers relating to men as friends as he finds "*girls have more hidden meanings*". Very few interview participants said that they had any personal contact with someone who identified as gay or lesbian. Consequently, their knowledge and understanding was confined to a limited set of stereotypes, revealing how little they knew of the everyday life of at least some of who identify as gay and lesbian with no challenge to their generalities. The opinions held by the young people in this study supported stereotypical views of gay men as being camp, predatory, good shoppers, contaminated and fashionable and of lesbians as being unattractive and butch. In some cases the lesbians were the focus of erotic fantasies among the boys.

Theme Four: Name Calling and The Minimising of Its Significance

All the students who participated in the study described the use of terms such as faggot, queer, gay or dyke by students to insult each other as pervasive behaviour. In other words these terms were part of the everyday parlance in their schools:

There is name calling...when we use the gay word it is really only messing, (I suppose if you were really gay it might affect you on a gay level...I would have heard someone being called gay four or five times already today. (Pupil 5, Boy 16, St. Colin's)

Gay' as a term is used a lot. It is a common word. Faggot, queer not meant because you are gay but because you are a twat. (Pupil 6, Boy, 17, St. Joseph's)

Bear in mind the use of language around words like 'gay', it is an everyday term, everything they don't approve of is 'gay', it is negative, it is what they use to describe something as negative. (Teacher 2, Woman, St. Anne's)

But as will be seen, the use of such terms was also immediately downplayed. For the most part the young people in this study minimised the use of homophobic words as "*just messing*" and said that they were words used to "*slag*" not to hurt others:

Gay terms are used casually, If you say something stupid that is gay! (Pupil 3, Girl, 17, Mount View)

If you are friendly with someone then it is messing, if you aren't friends with them then maybe it's bullying. (Pupil 1, Boy, 18, St. Joseph's)

You can get slugging from your friends, they will say you are a minger, loser or a dyke, but it is only joking. (Pupil 4, Girl, 16, St. Anne's)

Teachers also took this line, but pointed out that name calling was not harmless:

Regardless of their sexuality boys are slagged for being gay as an insult. They use words like fag, queer... If younger boys hear the gay terms used they repeat them, often with no idea of what they mean. (Teacher 1, Man, St. Colin's)

I would hear things like 'I am only messing', people don't realise they are bullying. (Deputy Principal, Woman, St. Mary's)

However, generally teachers and parents accept these terms as normal behaviour among adolescents and teachers opt to let this behaviour go unless it happens in a very overt manner:

If we hear terms used we would ask them to stop slugging, but it (gay etc.) is so much part of the vernacular now; sometimes you have to turn a deaf ear. (Teacher 1, Man, St. Colin's)

Yes comments are made, and are not confronted enough. I have brought attention to homophobic bullying and dealt with it in class, I think others might not. (Teacher 2, Man, St. Joseph's)

Have heard students pass comments but this is just a normal thing. (Parent 1, Woman, St. Anne's)

If it is happening right in front of me, I would stop it, if in the distance I wouldn't bother, it is just too frequent. It is a term I am not as opposed to as others, it is just a term that would be picked up on. (Teacher 3, Woman, Mount View)

The boy in St. Joseph's who described himself as being gay described his overall experience of the school as being very positive "*I love this school*". Because he was bullied in primary school he kept his head down a lot when he first came to this school. In relation to bullying generally he said that: "*there is a lot of name-calling among the boys in the school but girls are more subtle and will talk behind each others backs*". This pupil also confirmed that words like gay, faggot and queer were not always used against someone who is actually gay but more often they were used because "*they think you are a twat*". He went on to say that it was his opinion that most of the boys in his class are quite afraid of their own sexuality in that they might not be masculine enough or too feminine whereas girls do not care as much about this.

In the same school, during the interviews, one of the teachers identified himself as being gay and he also highlighted the pervasiveness of name-calling that could be termed as homophobic. He also blamed his colleagues for not challenging this behaviour enough, saying that it was too often let go. "*Young people are very aware when they are not challenged on things and so they will behave accordingly*". He highlighted the possible link between male suicide and confusion about sexual orientation in society saying that "*there is a need to protect these young people through policy, and training for school staff*". He also reported that while for many young people the name-calling doesn't cause them any distress, because they are not gay or lesbian, nevertheless it may be hurtful for a gay person to hear.

Whether homophobic bullying and name calling has become pervasive in schools because teachers do not address it when it occurs, or whether teachers do not address it because it would not be practical due to its pervasiveness, is not clear. Overall the teachers I met in these schools seemed to be anxious about a perceived disapproval by colleagues, parents, boards of management and even students if they were to strongly address homophobic bullying in their schools. It was almost as if they were afraid of what such action might say about themselves in relation to homosexuality.

Alison Jones (2003) argues that unlike fear, anxiety is understood to have a quality of indefiniteness. She says that "*anxiety lies in the terrible anticipation of something which we cannot quite explain or understand fully*". Consequently, in the silence around this issue from school authorities, colleagues, parents and in the wider school curriculum, it could be argued that the teachers have developed an anxiety about a possible reaction to them naming homosexuality and homophobia, having to constantly monitor themselves to avoid mentioning it (Foucault 1987). In other words, it is the power of silence that ultimately controls how teachers and students alike react to this issue.

Theme Five: Religious Influence on Teachers' Morals and Behaviours

The issue of religion and the employment of gay and lesbian teachers arose in all of the schools that had Catholic trustees. The Catholic Church, as the major patron of schooling in Ireland, has very specific teachings on homosexuality, describing it as a tendency towards “an intrinsic evil” and a form of moral disorder (Ratzinger 1986, p. 3). Staff were fully aware of this and either said that they would have to be careful because of the Catholic ethos of the school, or else went to great lengths to explain that their school had a liberal Catholic ethos and would be accepting of gay and lesbian people. Some explained that as long as a teacher kept their own sexuality private and was discreet and did not try to introduce the topic in class then there would not be a problem:

There is talk among the male teachers that there is one gay teacher but I doesn't think so. The macho men on the staff say quietly that he is gay. I don't know but if he was openly gay I would say it would be a problem from the top down, as we have a Catholic ethos in this school. (Teacher 2, Man, St. Colin's)

There is a religious ethos to this school. It is possibly more covert than overt, and I think it should be more overt. I think no matter what respect for each individual is crucial, for themselves and for others. In a Catholic school you would have to talk about what the teaching of the Church is on homosexuality. It depends on how it is done and approached. (Teacher 1, Woman, St. Joseph's)

Wouldn't think that parents would object if there was a gay staff member, there might be concerns if their values were transmitted but no more than a Sinn Fein member teacher, but you never know. The Catholic ethos here is very caring and Christian in its true sense. They don't do down people at all. (Teacher 5, Man, St. Mary's)

Some of the teachers identified the subjects that they teach as having a bearing on whether or not it mattered if they were gay or lesbian:

I wouldn't say that our school ethos would have a problem with homosexuality, there isn't really a heavy Catholic presence in the Board of Management, although there are teachers who are gay and they have to be careful because of the subjects they teach (Religious Education). (Teacher 1, Man, Mount View)

This has to do with the rationale of the Religious Education syllabus that is used in most Irish schools. It is catechetical and denominational in nature. In other words, a teacher of Religious Education is expected by the Church to uphold and model all of its teachings. If was felt by some that of a teacher of Religious Education identified him or herself as gay or lesbian publicly, this might call into question their commitment to the Church's teachings and jeopardise his/her job.

It is clear from what these teachers said that the Catholic Church is recognised as an authoritative presence in their schools. Furthermore, underpinning their comments is the belief that it is ok to be gay or lesbian in a school with a Catholic

ethos as long as you are not 'out' and you do not try to promote a gay or lesbian way of life as a valid option among the students. This would be contrary to Catholic teaching. You certainly could not be seen to behave homosexually in a visible way, such as bringing your same sex partner to visit the school or being active in a gay or lesbian parade or speaking positively about gay life.

Theme Six: Non-Recognition of Bisexuality or Fluidity of Sexual Orientation

An unarticulated theme, which emerges from the data is that at no stage did any of the interviewees consider the possibility that someone might be *bisexual*. People were seen as either heterosexual (i.e. normal) or homosexual (i.e. not normal). Bisexuality was not part of most students' vocabulary in that they seemed to lack the language and the general awareness of this concept. The one time that it was inadvertently referred to was when some of the boys in the single-sex school and in one of the co-educational schools referred to lesbian activity in pornographic films that they had seen where the women also had sexual relations with men. But even then they did not seem to be able to make a link to the possibility of a real person being bi-sexual.

In the wider issue in society, those who identify as bisexual face the extra prejudice of not being recognised or belonging to either of these opposing groups. In this sense the participants in this study could be said to reflect a fixed essentialist understanding of sexuality: they believe a person is either one thing or another and cannot change or encompass both. It could also be argued this is because bisexual identity further threatens the boundaries between heterosexual and homosexual in a way that even gay and lesbian people do not. In other words, as long as we can polarise sexuality then neither side has to consider the possibility of fluidity or crossing over.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined the main themes that emerged from the data collected through interviews with parents, students, teachers and senior management teams in schools in the greater Dublin area. It is clear from these themes that the participants had a binary view of sexuality in that people were considered to be either heterosexual or homosexual and that homosexuality was seen as a deviation from normal sexuality, which is always heterosexual. It was also clear from this data that TV and film media play a strong role in the reproduction of negative stereotypes of gays and lesbians among young people. The data also revealed that schools accept homophobic bullying as a normal part of school life and that many teachers do little to address it.

Furthermore, considering the problematic nature of homosexuality as an issue within the Catholic Church and the Church's role as the major patron of schooling in Ireland, it seems unlikely that it will be possible to deliver a programme on sex education that includes a positive approach to homosexuality as an acceptable way

of life for some. As Ireland becomes more pluralist in terms of values and identity this situation presents a significant challenge to any government that wishes to pursue an equality agenda where sexual orientation and sexual diversity are concerned.

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