

SUPPORTING LESBIAN, GAY AND BISEXUAL STUDENTS: THE ROLE OF TEACHERS



Introduction

The Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI) and the Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) have joined with GLEN – Gay and Lesbian Equality Network in publishing this resource to assist teachers in supporting lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) students and those perceived to be lesbian, gay or bisexual. Teachers and schools play an important role in supporting the holistic development of young people in schools. On a daily basis they are involved in nurturing and facilitating the development of critically thinking, skilled, knowledgeable, personally and socially effective young people.

This resource is aimed at supporting teachers in:

- **Recognising** the diversity of students that they teach, including recognising that some of their students are lesbian, gay or bisexual
- **Affirming** the value of diversity, including the diversity of sexual orientations (heterosexual, lesbian, gay or bisexual). Such affirmation improves everyone's experience of education
- **Supporting** students who identify as or are perceived to be lesbian, gay or bisexual
- **Challenging** name-calling and homophobic bullying in an effective way, resulting in improved safety in the school and in improved behaviour, attendance and educational achievement.

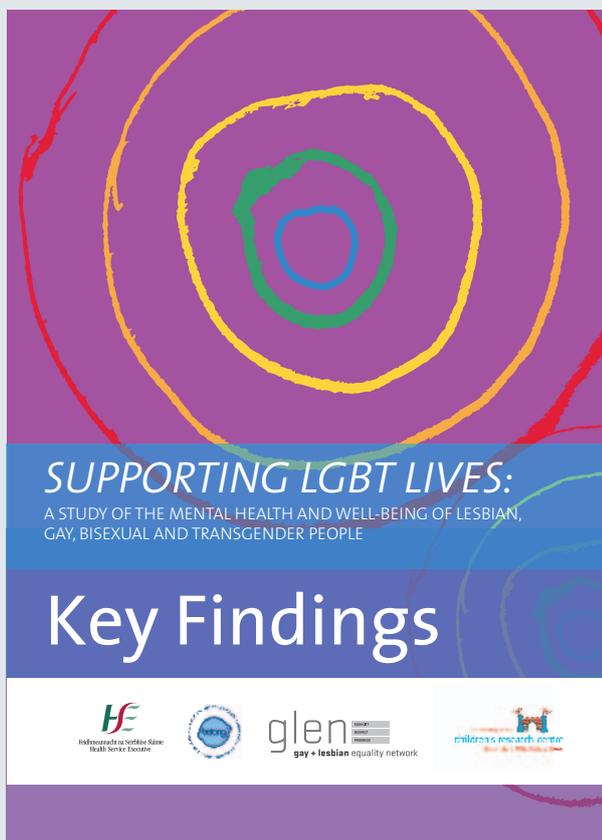


“My teacher was very supportive and got me through that time. She helped me to get into outside curricula, you know, a drama group and different things. And I could talk to her about anything” Lesbian woman looking back on a positive school experience

What's the Issue?

Currently in many of our schools sexual orientation is not addressed. Many young lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people and many others perceived to be LGB are unsafe in our schools. Many face considerable challenges related to bullying, invisibility and marginalisation. This impacts on their ability to participate fully and achieve in education and to complete their schooling.

Research (*Supporting LGBT Lives*) funded by the National Office for Suicide Prevention of the Health Service Executive found that the most common age that people realise they are lesbian, gay or bisexual is 12 years and the most common age that they disclose this to others ('come out') is 17 years. Some of the key findings from this study in which 1,110 lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people participated, related to the **safety**, **participation** and **support** of people in school: (quotes below also from *Supporting LGBT Lives*).



Safety

“I felt extremely isolated in school due to my own awareness of my sexual orientation and a negative attitude toward/about homosexuality amongst my peers and teachers” Gay, Male, 26

- 58% reported the existence of homophobic bullying in their schools;
- Over 50% had been called abusive names by fellow students;
- 34% reported homophobic comments by teachers and other staff members;
- 25% had been physically threatened by peers;
- 40% had been verbally threatened by fellow students because they were or were thought to be LGBT.

Participation

“I used to miss school frequently due to my feelings of isolation and eventually changed schools” Gay, Male, 26

“I left school because of the hurt and suffering I got in school, and the teachers didn't care, as I think it was a case of 'well they call him gay and he probably is gay, so why should we step in?'” Gay, Male, 23

- 72% felt that they couldn't be themselves at school;
- 20% admitted to missing school because they felt threatened or were afraid of getting hurt at school;
- 5% left school early because of how they were treated as a consequence of their LGBT identity.

“The stress of the Leaving and all that kind of stuff? Grand. But then the stress of actually being in school because I was bullied a bit...” Lesbian, female, 17

Support

“LGBT is never mentioned in the RSE Programme in school” Gay, male, 23

- 60% felt that there wasn't a teacher or other adult in school that they could talk to;
- Only 4% said there was open discussion of LGBT issues in Anti-Bullying seminars;
- Only 4% said that there was a written policy to protect LGBT students from homophobic bullying.

What can teachers do?

Teachers can provide leadership within schools by recognising, supporting and affirming lesbian, gay and bisexual students and by challenging homophobic bullying and behaviour.

The TUI, ASTI and GLEN consider the role teachers can play in supporting lesbian, gay and bisexual students to be very important, particularly in light of research that reveals:

- The majority of teachers hear and witness homophobic name-calling and bullying
- A sizeable proportion of teachers are aware of physical homophobic bullying
- Most teachers want to do something to address homophobic bullying
- Many teachers feel ill-prepared to be able to do something about addressing this issue
- When schools seriously address the issue of homophobic bullying the experiences of young lesbian and gay people dramatically improve and the culture of the school improves for all students and for staff. A positive school experience is strongly associated with well-being and mental health resilience amongst LGB people.

Acknowledging that there are significant issues for lesbian, gay and bisexual students in many Irish schools, the ASTI, TUI and GLEN suggest that teachers could take the following actions which would help to make schools safe and inclusive places for LGB students and those perceived to be LGB.

Recognise

How can you recognise that there are LGB students in your school?

- Acknowledge that there are LGB people in the school.
- Remember there are quite likely to be LGB people in your classroom
- Mention LGB people and issues where appropriate.

Support

What you can do as a teacher to support students?

- The most supportive thing you can do is to not allow homophobic name-calling of any description in any situation. Treat homophobic bullying as you would any other form of bullying, for example racist bullying.
- Check your schools Anti-Bullying policy and Code of Behaviour to ensure they explicitly name and address homophobic bullying.

- Suggest your school starts to log instances of bullying, including homophobic bullying. Consider how to provide a supportive and sensitive means by which students can report such bullying.
- Encourage the school to provide information about appropriate support services for LGB young people. For example, BeLonG To Youth Services (see resources section).
- Encourage students to seek support if they need it. Be explicit in your availability for students to speak to you and members of the school's pastoral care or guidance teams.

Affirm

How can you as a teacher affirm young gay and lesbian people?

- Model the kind of behaviours you'd like to see students and others demonstrate. For example show that you respect lesbian, gay and bisexual people when the issue arises in your teaching.
- Use opportunities, such as news stories or events, to provide respectful messages about lesbian, gay or bisexual people .
- Discourage stereotyping and encourage critical thinking and discussion around difference, diversity and prejudice.

Challenge

What can you do to challenge homophobic behaviour and attitudes?

- Challenge yourself! Do you assume that all the young people you teach or indeed your colleagues, are heterosexual?
- Challenge others when you hear words like 'gay' being used to insult or put-down others.
- Challenge your colleagues to seriously address the issue of homophobic bullying. For example start by discussing it at a staff meeting.
- Request that training on relevant sexual orientation issues and diversity issues be provided to you and the entire staff.

What supports are available?

Policy Guidance

- *Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Students in Post-Primary Schools: Guidance for Principals and School Leaders.* Department of Education and Skills and GLEN (2009)
- *10 Things you should know about LGBT Students: 5 Things Your School Can Do.* Department of Education and Skills and GLEN (2009).
- *Supporting Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual and Transgender Students: The Role of Guidance Counsellors.* National Centre for Guidance in Education and GLEN (2010)
- *Including Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Students in School Policies: Guidelines for Principals.* Forthcoming from the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals, Department of Education and Skills and GLEN.
- All above resources available from www.glen.ie

In-service and Classroom Resources

- The Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) Support Service delivers Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) training on a range of issues, including sexual orientation. Information is available from www.sphe.ie
- The SPHE Support service is currently working in partnership with the HSE, GLEN and BeLonG To Youth Services to develop a resource titled "*Growing Up Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender: An SPHE Resource*". The SPHE support service will make training available to support teachers in using the resource which is anticipated to be completed for the 2011/2012 academic year.

Resources from other organisations

- BeLonG To Youth Service - A national youth service for LGBT young people aged 14 - 23 years. This service is supported by Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, and the National Office for Suicide Prevention. BeLonG To is also engaged in training of teachers and other professionals, awareness campaigns on homophobia, and advocacy on behalf of LGBT young people with the government and other education partners. BeLonG To creates resources such as DVDs, posters and information booklets for young people and their parents. See www.belongto.org
- BeLonG To, supported by the National Association of Principals & Deputy Principals, recently launched *Stand Up! LGBT Awareness Week* in post-primary schools around Ireland. *Stand Up!* aims to eliminate

homophobic bullying by promoting friendship among students, www.belongto.org/campaign.aspx

- *More than a Phase: A Resource Guide for the Inclusion of Young LGBT Learners* provides comprehensive and practical information and suggestions. www.pobal.ie

Laws

- All schools are prohibited from discriminating on nine grounds, including sexual orientation. Harassment and sexual harassment are also prohibited. Moreover schools are legally responsible for harassment or discrimination experienced by students unless they take reasonable steps to prevent it.
- Proactively and effectively addressing homophobic bullying is helping schools to meet their legal obligations. More information in *Schools and the Equal Status Act*, 2nd Edition. www.equality.ie

Research and Further Reading

- *Supporting LGBT Lives: A Study of the Mental Health and Well-Being of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People.* (Mayock et al. 2009) TCD/UCD. www.glen.ie
- *Straight Talk: Researching Gay and Lesbian Issues in the School Curriculum* (2006) DCU. Provides research evidence on the extent of homophobic bullying.
- *Valuing Visibility: An Exploration of How Sexual Orientation Issues Arise and Are Addressed in Post-Primary Schools* - Summary Report. NUI Maynooth, GLEN and DES. www.glen.ie
- Visit www.glen.ie/education for a full range of resource research reports and supports.

DIVERSITY



Diversity - a term used to encompass the many differences that make up what it means to be human; including gender, ethnicity, intelligence, age, place of origin, family status, sexual orientation and many others. It is widely accepted that acknowledging and respecting diversity in all its forms is critical in advancing quality education outcomes for all.

“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 McAleese at the International Association of Suicide Prevention XXIV Biennial Conference

“We live in a society which demands tolerance, sensitivity and respect for diversity. The Teachers’ Union of Ireland is committed to assisting teachers promote a practical recognition of dignity for all young people, irrespective of their sexual orientation.”

**Peter MacMenamin,
TUI Gen Secretary.**

“Schools should be safe places where diversity is valued. We should aim for equal respect for the human dignity of all members of the school community”.

**Pat King,
ASTI General Secretary**

GLEN is policy and strategy focused NGO which aims to deliver ambitious and positive change for lesbian, gay and bisexual people (LGB) in Ireland in schools, workplaces, in health and other service provision and in legal recognition of same-sex relationships and families. A key priority for GLEN is to support the education partners in ensuring schools are safe, supportive, affirming environments in which young LGB people may benefit from education on an equal footing with their heterosexual peers.



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