How is Homophobia Tackled in Primary Schools?

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Abstract

This article aims to discuss some of the issues surrounding homophobia in schools and how to tackle these issues. It starts off by discussing some of the problems children are facing with homophobia and homophobic bullying in schools. Children are not being taught about this topic in schools as they are with racism or other similar issues. As they are uneducated they do not understand and respect the differences between Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) people and themselves. From research it is clear that some of the reasons this is not being tackled in school include the lack of policies and the confidence of teachers to tackle it. The article then continues to discuss some of the approaches to tackling homophobia and how we can improve teachers' confidence to tackle the issue. Using stories to tackle homophobia found that it can engage children but they react differently depending upon their age. This suggested that it is an appropriate approach for certain age groups but another approach might be more useful for others. Policies have also been found to be effective when tackling homophobia but research has found that policies outline re-active ways to tackling homophobia which, although they do need to be in place, are not as positive as pro-active ways to tackling the issue. Overall the article finds that we need to use a balanced variety of approaches to tackle homophobia from the ones discussed. This will enable children of all ages and abilities to engage with the topic and begin to think about the similarities and differences between themselves and LGBT people.

Keywords

Homophobia; primary schools

Introduction

"Two female dolls cannot get married it is illegal!" I overhear a child in a mixed reception and year one class say to another child. This sparked up a debate about homosexuality in the group playing with the dolls. Listening to children this young raising a topic that is prominent in society, made me question whether these children will ever have the opportunity to discuss it as a class, inside the school environment, and how homophobia is tackled in schools. In this case it could have been down to the lack of education that these children were inadvertently being homophobic or maybe it was because of a parental view. During a ten week school placement in a year three class, there were some incidents of homophobia so the school used small group mini-assemblies to address the topic. During this time a variety of techniques, such as videos and stories, were used to help introduce the topic so the children could discuss their own feelings as a class. This helped the teacher to identify any misconceptions and address any offensive language being used. This idea was adapted from ideas used in a local secondary school which suggests that although a lot has already been done to try and tackle homophobia in secondary schools maybe we need to start a lot earlier and have these conversations in primary schools.

In this article I hope to find some ways in which we can approach tackling this subject in primary schools based upon some perspectives of what is happening in these schools at the moment. I have found a variety of perspectives from teachers, academic sources, the government and national television debates. I have researched a lot around what has already been done in schools to tackle this subject and how we can build upon what has already been done. Through this research I hope to suggest a variety of resources we can use in a normal classroom situation to help get children talking about the topic in a sensible non-judgemental way. This will hopefully help children gain a better understanding of the differences between themselves and others and lead to fewer homophobic incidents in schools. I hope to be able to use some of these techniques and resources in my future classroom if these issues arise.

Definition

If we are to teach homophobia at a primary level it is important to ensure that we are all defining the terms in the same way. Atkinson (2010) defines homophobia stating that it "refers to outright expression of prejudice, dislike or distaste towards lesbian, gay or bisexual people or the silencing or ignoring of these peoples identities or existence by individuals or institutions". However, Loutzenheiser (2015) raises the important point that homophobia can be defined as a fear people have of homosexuality even within themselves. This is called internalised homophobia and can sometimes be part of the reason people are homophobic towards others. Loutzenheiser (2015) also discusses the idea of heteronormativity being a reason for homophobia as it is the way in which a heterosexual community believe they are the primary form of human relationships and no other type of relationship can be recognised as heterosexuality is the norm.

Perspectives

Before looking at some of the ways in which to tackle homophobia I think it is important to find out some perspectives from varying sources attached to schools. An interesting perspective comes from Gamble (2014) who as a lesbian teacher herself has found it difficult to come out in her job, particularly in religious run schools. She has found conversations in the staffroom stressful and suggests that LGBT teachers are often more worried about the messages they are sending to pupils, around types of bullying being worse than others, than losing their job. Libertarianism MGTOW's (2015) video from Newsnight debates this idea of whether it is a good idea for teachers to come out in schools if they feel this way. In the video Zeta Lomax; a teacher who has come out to her pupils, found that the school did not put pressure on her to come out but were supportive when she did. She highlights the important conversations she had with the pupils around the subject at the time and how the pupils are just discussing how people are people. However, Milo Yiannopoulos raises an important point by questioning whether we want children to deal with these thoughts and experiences at such a young age. This is why in many schools, as Bhana (2012) found out, teachers avoid the subject by sitting in silence as these schools believe that the school environment is for academic purposes only and talking about these issues is considered inappropriate. This fear of speaking out could be linked to a fear of losing their jobs. It would be interesting to see if these teachers feel more comfortable about coming out if homophobia is tackled in their school.

OFSTED (2012) found some important findings in schools stating that pupils in all of the schools in the review had heard, and could give examples of, language associated with bullying in terms of ability, race, religion and particularly sexuality. An important finding in these schools was that few of them actually had a clear stance on whether this was acceptable or not. By not having this surely they cannot be sure of how to deal with any

language or bullying that arises in their school. Addressing this language is clearly another area to focus upon when tackling homophobia. Some of the academic perspectives, such as the No Outsiders Project, Atkinson (2010), suggest that we need to undo homophobia by challenging heteronormativity and helping teachers understand homosexuality themselves. Through the project they found that teachers are often scared about using the terminology, in case they use it incorrectly or, through the use of labels, inadvertently increase homophobic incidents. Bhana (2012) also states that children need to be aware of the current issues in regards to gay rights and homophobic violence so they are aware of some of the reasons why they are current issues, and form an educated opinion for themselves.

Links to the National Curriculum
Perhaps the most important starting point in schools is to look at the National Curriculum. The Department for Education's (2011) curriculum had a clear focus upon the importance of ensuring children have a clear understanding of the similarities and differences between people and respecting them. In Key Stage One (KS1) children were taught that bullying is wrong and how to deal with it if they were being bullied. This was built upon in Key Stage Two (KS2) where children were made aware of the different types of relationships and family structures before recognising the consequences and challenging bullying and stereotypes. However, in the Department for Education's (2013) curriculum schools are allowed to devise their own Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PHSE) curriculum from the PHSE association's (2014) guidance. This guidance suggests that children in KS1 should be learning how to respond to bullying and who to tell as well as the similarities and differences between people. Children in KS2 should be learning about prejudice-based language and how to respond to it as well as the different types of relationships. However, as this is only guidance and schools now have the opportunity to develop their own curriculum, will this mean that faith schools now have an opportunity to miss out discussing this topic entirely? By raising this important issue we can hopefully ensure that local authorities check that these schools are still teaching the children in their schools about this issue and impartially.

What has been done so far?
There have been several initiatives implemented into schools already around these topics. The introduction of the Global Dimension, by the Department for Education (2005), provided the first opportunities for children to discuss similarities and differences between people and cultures around the world. The eight key concepts helped define an outline for what children should be learning about the world around them. They suggested that children should understand prejudice and discrimination, why they occur and how they can be tackled. Although this is no longer included in the new National Curriculum it is still used in schools as a good basis to ensure children get these opportunities. However, since this was introduced Atkinson (2010) took part in the No Outsiders project which still found that children were not being educated around this topic. Alongside a team of researchers Atkinson spent two and a half years in 26 very different primary schools using a variety of different approaches to tackle homophobia by challenging the norm of heteronormativity. Although they did not reach their final goal they hope some of the ideas they introduced will continue for a long time and other schools will begin to adopt some of their approaches.

Newton (2015) found that homophobic language in schools is particularly high with 9 in 10 teachers saying they hear phrases like "that's so gay" in schools. This is backed up by Stonewall's (2012) report which also found that 99% of pupils hear these phrases. This suggests that tackling language used around LGBT pupils and even in schools in general is a good starting point. Another important finding, which links back to addressing this issue in

faith schools, is that only half of LGBT pupils report that their teachers and schools say homophobic bullying is wrong, with only 37% doing so in faith schools. We can link this to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (2007) Anti-bullying alliance which states that teachers and staff in schools are most likely to be the people who have to respond to, and deal with, homophobic bullying. If they are not stating that homophobic bullying is wrong it could be leading to further incidents. However, the Primary National Strategy (2005) and Roper, O'Connell, Chapman and Pollard (2007) were both brought in to help develop schemes for teachers to use their PHSE lessons to address these concepts and talk about different family situations. If we are still making these conclusions from recent studies, after these schemes were introduced, we can conclude that these schemes, whilst they have made some improvement, have not completely eradicated homophobia and other approaches need to be implemented.

How can we continue to tackle Homophobia in schools?
Pickford (2009) makes an important point by suggesting that we need to be careful about the way we approach tackling homophobia, as "a superficial, scattergun approach" will be "counter-productive" and will inevitably lead to "the reinforcing of stereotypes". We need to ensure that all schools plan how they are going to approach the topic beforehand and the resources they are going to use throughout the school. If we reinforce the stereotypes we will only be making the situation worse and this will only lead to more homophobic incidents. Here I aim to analyse some of the ways we could tackle homophobia in schools to enable schools to choose the most appropriate approach for their school.

Policies
A lot of the findings from studies already undertaken suggest that schools are not producing policies to protect LGBT pupils or families. Russell (2011) states that introducing these policies would provide a good basis for supporting LGBT pupils and for teachers to follow, when dealing with homophobic incidents. Hatzenbuehler and Keyes's (2013) study found that as the number of schools introducing, homophobia inclusive, anti-bullying policies increased, the rate of suicide attempts decreased. There was also an increase in the percentage of LGBT pupils who felt safe at school and wanted to attend. However, Smith, Smith, Obsorn and Samara (2008) state that some schools may not actually engage with the anti-bullying policies when dealing with incidents and instead they are just there to surplus the legal requirements of the school. If teachers are not using or following the policy when dealing with incidents then they will not change the way in which they deal with the children involved. Hansen (2007) points out the fact that without support these policies are unlikely to produce change in the incidents of homophobia in the school. It is also important to note that whilst Smith (2013) emphasises the importance of using pro-active strategies for dealing with bullying, such as implementing whole-school policies, when teachers follow the policy they are reacting to an incident that has taken place whereas other strategies may reduce the incidents they have to react to. Implementing these whole school policies is important but we should include in these policies how we are going to spark discussions around the topic and be pro-active about tackling homophobia. Loutzenhesier (2015) raises another important area around policies as how one person defines themselves by an identity term may not be the same definition that another person would identify. This means that when following policies in schools teachers could be accidentally stereotyping a child who is being bullied into a category that child does not actually identify with. When writing policies it is important to ensure we have this in mind and do not deal with incidents based upon stereotypical concepts.

Stories

Another pro-active way of tackling homophobia is to use stories and books. Atkinson (2010) discusses the idea that stories help promote discussion in lessons and once discussion has started the teacher can address misconceptions and appropriate and inappropriate language. Through the No Outsider's Project, Atkinson (2010) found that when read a story the younger children took it at face value but from year three upwards there was "increasing discomfort" around the idea that the two main characters were in a gay relationship. However, a year six class which had done a lot of work in PHSE, using books and other approaches, reacted well and had a good discussion about the book and some of the challenges the characters faced. Gleitzman (2015) also found that 'Two Weeks with the Queen' promoted good discussions, particularly in terms of the children being able to put themselves in the victim's shoes and how they would feel. It is important to make sure that through these discussions we challenge the language used as Gleitzman also suggests that children might not realise the language they are using is unacceptable. However, whilst Stonewall (2013) recognise the importance of normalising homosexuality, they also recognise that there are parents and members of staff who are not comfortable with this. Therefore, it is important that we communicate and have discussions with the whole of the school community before using stories to address this topic. Atkinson (2010) builds upon this by stating that this is only one way to address homophobia and although it builds up topics to explore around the issue it is the discussion itself that will help to tackle homophobia. Therefore if teachers are not comfortable having this discussion they will be reluctant to engage in this approach. Uninformed discussions from the teacher could also lead to the reinforcement of stereotypes. Wan (2006) emphasises the importance of presenting stories and texts in meaningful ways, as providing stories with simple comprehension questions and answers will not engage the children. By developing a personal connect to the story as a teacher we can teach the empowering nature of the story as well as the important morals around homophobia.

Teacher Training

Newton (2015) recognises that to prevent homophobic language and incidents, staff need to be trained in order to be confident about appropriate language and ways to deal with homophobia. This will also encourage and work alongside the whole-school approach to tackling the issues. By giving staff training Newton (2015) also suggests we can bridge the gap to communicating with parents about the issue and the ways and reasons the school are tacking homophobia. This will hopefully lead to an increase in the involvement and education of parents and their ideas around the issue and maybe even help to support LGBT pupils when they eventually "come out" to their parents. Stonewall (2013) support this idea stating that training will not only make staff more confident in tackling the issue but help them to do so more effectively and with greater communication. However, the Department of Education (2014) discuss training in regards to the anti-bullying policy, stating that if teachers a trained effectively to follow the school's policy the number of incidents should decrease as staff are more likely to be able to meet the needs of the pupils in their school. This suggests that training needs to work alongside some sort of policy so it is specific to the school and not just general training. It would also help the teachers to match their responses to incidents to the environment of the school. Dellenty (2012) found that after receiving expansive and detailed staff training on tackling homophobia in schools, including help in planning lessons around the subject, attendance went up and there was a greater sense of cohesion, awareness and acceptance throughout the school and community. However, a setback many researchers such as Walsh, Hooven and Kronick (2013) have found, when looking at the development of staff training in schools, is that it is more difficult to engage support staff in this training. This is a major setback as support staff play critical roles in

schools, have more one-to-one connections with the pupils and are more likely to notice homophobic behaviour.

OFSTED Suggestions and Whole School Approaches
Since OFSTED's (2012) report, OFSTED (2014) have used the information to make some suggestions for how to tackle some of the issues raised in the report. They suggest that when going into schools inspectors should be looking to see if any homophobic language is being used in the school in a derogatory way. If they do notice such language the school should be informed and provided with the materials or training to help tackle this issue. Another area they wish to check is the bullying and safeguarding policy objectives and the way in which the school as a whole are tackling the issue. This is to make sure that the school are meeting the needs of LGBT pupils or pupils with LGBT relatives or friends. Atkinson (2010) engages with this whole-school approach by stating that work around challenging homophobia needs to be integrated throughout lessons and not just one off assemblies or standalone PHSE lessons. The Department for Children, Schools and Families (2007) anti-bullying alliance also suggest the important of referring to homophobia during Anti-Bullying Week so that children have the opportunity to address varying types of bullying over a period of time rather than in one off lessons. Ekins and Grimes (2009) suggest an entirely different approach to tackling homophobia as part of a whole school approach; using provision maps. They suggest that provision maps help to provide a visual and easily accessible record of the provisions being used to tackle important issues across the school. They also state the important of a provision map being created by the staff, for the staff. By creating the map themselves, and having a say in how the school are going to tackle issues like homophobia, the staff will have a sense of ownership over the methods being used and are more likely to tackle the issue more effectively.

Materials and Resources from Charities and Organisations
Since the recent reports and information brought out by the government regarding homophobia and its prevalence in schools there has been a great deal of resources brought out by charities and organisations. Amnesty International's (2015) activity pack is aimed at helping teachers discuss varying topics based upon questions about LGBT people and their culture. The pack raises important questions about places where it is not safe for LGBT to live or be "out". They state that one of the most important reasons to tackling homophobia is to ensure that LGBT rights are explored in schools so that all young people can learn without fear of their safety. GLEN (2015) continue to build upon this by suggesting that children enjoy speaking about their families and home life and all children should be able to feel safe in doing so. They also emphasise the importance of the teacher's response to children when they are disclosing this information and the way teachers represent family types during lessons. GLEN (2015) also extend this to creating a positive school climate through their video and information resources. However, it is important to note that some of their videos such as "The Inclusive School" which they suggest to be played at a staff meeting may make some staff members uncomfortable, particularly if there are any members of staff who are not "out" yet.

The CHIPS programme; a resource created by Barnes (2014) has caused a lot of debate in Birmingham schools. Barnes (2014) found the programme to be very effective at creating healthy attitudes in schools around diversity and lowering bullying rates. Some of the main principles of the programme are to give definitions for terminology and to help teachers feel more comfortable talking and teaching about the topic. However, in a school in Birmingham where the programme had been implemented Williams (2014) found that parents were very unhappy about the implementation of the programme and at a governors meeting became

so aggressive towards the head teacher that he had to remove himself from the meeting. This kind of reaction is one that we need to think about and prepare for before we implement any form of programme or resource to tackle homophobia. Williams (2014) suggests that by explaining to the parents that the school respect their right to have a personal opinion but now same-sex marriage is legal and couples are fostering it is important to ensure children are aware of different family structures before they come into contact with these people. Moffat (2007) builds upon this stating that by explaining the benefits their child will gain, such as empathy and confidence to be who they are, we can the parents to understand better why we are teaching this topic.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are a number of different approaches to tackling homophobia in schools. It is important to ensure that schools are using these approaches to address homophobia as it is a prevalent issue in schools at the moment. It is also important to ensure we are fully aware, as well as the children, of homosexuality and the definitions for any terminology before we try and tackle the issue. As teachers we must ensure we are fully confident in what we are teaching before we address the topic so we do not pass on any misconceptions. Whilst each individual way of tackling homophobia, from stories and training to policies, all have their own advantages and disadvantages it is important to make sure we are using a wide range of approaches to tackling homophobia. This will ensure we are engaging all of the children in the topic and ensuring we are fully tackling the problem across the whole school. It is also important to make sure whilst reactive measures have to be in place to deal with incidents, we are putting an emphasis on tackling homophobia with pro-active resources and methods. This will help to reduce the number of incidents we have to deal with and encourage the children in our schools to be more empathetic and knowledgeable about the world around them and different people or cultures. Whilst we cannot expect to completely eradicate bullying and homophobia in schools in the next few years it is important that we start to reduce the number of incidents. From this we will hopefully start to see LGBT pupils and staff members feeling more included in school life.

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