

Glad to be inclusive?

Mark Jennett clarifies why schools and colleges need to talk about homosexuality

The majority of schools and colleges acknowledge that homophobia needs to be challenged alongside other forms of prejudice. However, in this article I argue that few do enough to ensure that gay relationships are recognised as being equally valid as heterosexual ones.

All children are equal...

Despite recent advances in the legal status of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people, numerous young people – not just those who identify as gay – continue to endure homophobic bullying. Many of these children will fail to achieve their educational potential and, if for no other reason, this makes society's continuing discomfort around homosexuality an issue of concern for all schools and colleges.

Most schools strive to combat prejudice and discrimination by celebrating the ethnic diversity of their communities, promoting the achievements of women and challenging preconceptions about the opportunities available to disabled people. Few, however, have done much to acknowledge their LGB members or to encourage the kind of open discussion about sexuality necessary to ensure that LGB students will be as confident and successful as their heterosexual peers.

Schools should welcome and support all members of their community – regardless of their sexuality. However, some members of staff continue to display homophobic attitudes, and even those who don't often lack the confidence to do anything more than respond to negative comments. There is a prevailing atmosphere of heterosexism in which homophobia is inconsistently censured. Gay relationships are seen as something 'other' and as something that cannot be discussed in the same terms as straight ones. This does little to help LGB students feel confident about expressing their sexuality or coping with prejudice and discrimination.

... but some are more equal

As professionals, *all* school staff have an equal responsibility to *all* their students. While some may be uncomfortable with this, schools have a duty to ensure that LGB young people have the same opportunities and enjoy the same confidence and sense of entitlement as their straight peers. It

goes without saying that staff should always challenge homophobic comments, and feel confident to answer questions about sexuality openly, honestly and without embarrassment. Where this is not the case then training can help. It is also vital that schools support LGB staff to be open with colleagues about their sexuality and ensure – for example, through clear statements in the school prospectus – that all members of the community are aware that the school values its LGB students, staff, parents and carers.

Perhaps most importantly, schools should regularly discuss gay and lesbian sexuality within the curriculum – in the same way as they discuss issues related to, for example, ethnicity and gender. By acknowledging that LGB people are present in all communities, and have been throughout history, we help to challenge the foundations of prejudice. Simply by acknowledging same-sex relationships in a relaxed and open manner, we confront the impression that they are something that should not be mentioned and indicate that discussion of sexuality – like ethnicity, faith or gender – is acceptable and contributes to our knowledge of the world.

Every child matters

For young people, the 'ordinariness' of heterosexual relationships is constantly affirmed – and never more so than in school, where they encounter them every day in history, English, drama and geography lessons. By contrast, discussion of LGB relationships within the curriculum – if it happens at all – is frequently confined to SRE. This serves to perpetuate the mistaken impression that homosexual relationships are primarily about sexual activity – although few of us see heterosexual relationships in these limited terms. February is LGBT history month and provides an ideal opportunity for young people to be introduced to key historical figures such as civil rights campaigner Bayard Rustin or scientist Alan Turing. There are many examples of same-sex relationships in literature ranging from Shakespeare's sonnets to Aidan Chambers' Carnegie Medal-winning *Postcards from No Man's Land*.

Young people are familiar with lesbian and gay characters from television programmes

such as *Shameless* (Ian Gallagher is that rarest of fictional creations – a gay teenager who isn't defined by his sexuality). However, they are far more likely to see stereotypical images of gay men and (less frequently) lesbians in light entertainment programmes or, conversely, to encounter them in documentaries about homophobia or prejudice. Unlike their straight counterparts, gay characters tend to be given storylines that focus on their sexuality and are rarely presented as contented or ordinary. Schools can begin to address this imbalance not only by using media studies and drama lessons to question the validity of these images but also by taking opportunities to discuss sexuality where these present themselves across the curriculum.

Curricular opportunities

In particular, there are many opportunities within the PSHE and citizenship curricula to place discussion of sexuality within a broader context. They include work on multiple identities, equal opportunities, the representation of minority groups in the media, the roots of (and links between) discrimination shown towards particular groups in society and how the law and campaigning organisations work to combat prejudice. PSHE and citizenship lessons also provide opportunities for pupils to talk about what they could do in situations in which they might feel excluded or how they could help others facing discrimination. Video resources such as Channel 4's *Growing Up Gay* – in which LGB young people talk about their lives, their families and their relationships – can be useful tools to promote discussion and also to highlight the similarities as well as the differences between their own experience of the world and that of their straight peers.

Further information

Growing Up Gay is available from www.4learningshop.co.uk
LGBT History Month 2007
www.lgbthistorymonth.org.uk

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