Homophobia in primary schools: does it exist?

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Abstract

This paper outlines research into homophobia in primary schools that was conducted with academics, support staff and students engaged in initial teacher training at a university in the North West of England and teaching staff from local primary schools. The research involved the use of questionnaires, semi-structured and unstructured interview to gain insight into the existence of homophobia in primary schools. The data from the study suggests that homophobia exists within primary settings and that children as young as five employ discriminatory language. The study details that incidents of homophobia include those related to gender identity; perceptions of masculinity and femininity; school and workplace bullying and multimedia coverage of homosexuality. The study demonstrates that barriers to tackling homophobia exist in primary schools and that these may stem from staff, parental attitudes, school policy and issues relating to faith and religion.

Keywords: homophobia; homophobic; homosexuality; primary schools; teachers; education; children.

Introduction

'God hates Fags'

This is the slogan of the Westboro Baptist Church in Kansas, USA. In 2009, this group of American Christian fundamentalists threatened to cross the Atlantic to picket the George Tomlinson Primary School in London because of its anti-homophobia work. The church's website celebrates these 'peaceful demonstrations... [as] ... opposing the fag-lifestyle of soul-damning, nation-destroying filth'.

Whilst all demonstrations are indeed 'peaceful', the placards and shouting by the enthusiastic group of male and female adults and children exclaim: 'Aids cures Fags,' 'Fags doom nations,' 'Fag = Aids,' 'Death penalty for Fags,' and 'God hates Fags!'

The local authority supported the George Tomlinson Primary School in their plans for a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) history month. The range of lessons planned by the school was varied, diverse and included the use of an assortment of resources. One such resource was a children's picture book whose storyline

concerned an established same-gender relationship - based around the story of two male penguins finding and caring for an abandoned egg.

Recent media reporting of homophobic incidents in society, such as the murder of Liverpool teenager Michael Causer (Johnson, 2009) highlight the issue of homophobia to be of vital importance for all our schools. Tickle (2009) suggests that homophobia in society may be linked symbiotically to homophobia in schools. Whilst evidence of homophobic incidents exists for secondary schools, where some 90% of teachers report homophobic bulling or harassment (Guasp, 2009: 4), there is little research to suggest that occurrences are as prevalent in primary schools. This current research therefore examined whether homophobia existed in primary schools and if so how was this form of discrimination manifested. Additionally, the study sought to ascertain what homophobia meant to practitioners and how they dealt with homophobic incidents within their classrooms and schools.

Defining and operationalising Homophobia

At the outset of the paper it seems necessary to provide a definition of homophobia. Ontologically the word, 'homophobia' derives from the Greek and the Latin to mean the 'fear of the same'. In 1972 Weinberg framed homophobia within a medical discourse as the fear of being trapped in a room with a homosexual. This term and its associated discourse was rapidly assimilated into common parlance to mean an irrational fear of homosexuality or homosexuals. Significantly and sadly, this developing contextualisation has from 1972 to 2011 observed many extreme incidents of abuse that range far beyond the fear of entrapment.

Most recently homophobia has been defined as,
> an irrational dislike, hated or fear of people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB) which can lead to damage to self-esteem, bullying, harassment, violent assault and, in extreme cases, even premature death.
>> (Anti-Homophobic Bullying Forum: Liverpool Children's Services, 2009: 3)

For the purpose of the study, though, transgender and transsexual people are included in the definition of homophobia, to encompass the communities commonly referred to as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT). Through exploring the meanings associated with homophobia the study sought to develop the work of Plummer (2001) which developed a broader significance for homophobia rather than just that located around the fear or hatred of homosexuals.

The following review of the literature is contextualised within a critical examination of three main themes those of gender and identity, homophobic bullying and media representations of homosexuality.

Gender identity

Perceptions of masculinity and femininity

Heteronormativity has been described as the universal presumption of heterosexuality (Dennis, 2003) where the underlying presence of heterosexual values are continually reproduced as the dominant sexual discourse in the social order. Sears (2005) and Pascoe (2007) propose a link between homophobic behaviour in schools and narrow constructions of masculinity among adolescent boys. For example, in the heteronormative value system that exists today, boys are expected to act in a 'manly' way demonstrating sporting prowess and girls are expected to express themselves in a traditionally 'feminine' way, such as, showing artistic creativity. These stereotypes are reinforced within and by schools. Guasp, (2009: 9) states that '... people seem to be very definite in their ideas of what a proper boy or a proper girl should do or be interested in.' As this primary teacher accounts, it 'takes very little deviation from these so called norms for a person to be singled out and picked on' (Guasp, 2009: 9). It would appear then that failure to comply too constructs of 'normativity' are correlated with peer rejection and ridicule.

Research by Warwick, Chase and Aggleton (2004: 11) details that young men in particular, regardless of whether they identify themselves as homosexual or not, will ' ... react particularly violently and in ways that lead to serious injury' to comments that question their masculinity. Additionally, Martino (1999) relates that pastimes such as reading and enjoying the arts are also observed as challenges to internalised and externalised images of masculinity. Martino (1999) denotes there are those in schools who observe studiousness as the plural reverse of a strong masculine identity. Indeed, research into the under achievement of boys (Younger and Warrington, 2005) strongly suggests that the issue of image and status in school is correlated with some males' willingness or capacity to learn and partake in education (Martino, 1999).

Like boys, girls can also have their sexuality called into question because of stereotypical and normative constructions of gender. For example, physically active girls' femininity or sexuality may be questioned due to the 'traditionally assumed links between the macho image of sport and lesbianism' (Cockburn and Clarke, 2002: 658). Whereas for boys interest, participation and competence in sports can confer a status denied to peers not involved in such activities (Ashley, 2003). Positively, in terms of role models and societal constructions of gender, sporting prowess is not restricted to heterosexual alpha-males. For example, in 2009 the rugby player Gareth Thomas, the Wales and British Lions 'legend', declared his homosexuality; the first player ever to do so. Importantly, for this study, in both primary and secondary settings, research has identified the importance of the male identity. However, it has also articulated that this identity may be one based upon a limited construct of what it is to be a boy or a man. Such constructs Phoenix, Frosh and Pattman (2003) argues are founded upon displays of violence in the pursuit of a hyper-masculine identity. An identity that does not respect nor value constructions of difference.

Homophobic bullying: the role of language

Offensive jokes, language, innuendo and mockery are amongst the examples of homophobic behaviour identified by the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT 2008). Other researchers (Hunt and Jensen 2007, Warwick et al, 2004) denote the usage of homophobic language is common place in schools with 97% of pupils admitting to hearing remarks such as 'poof, dyke, rug-muncher, queer and bender' on a regular basis. Interestingly, in terms of this study, it appears children employ such language as just one weapon in the wider contextualisation of homophobia. Rivers (2000) highlights homophobic bullying also includes: physical assault; hostility; isolation; rumours; ridicule; theft of property and sexual assault. Most recently the Department for Education Children and Families (2007) confirmed that such bullying may involve hitting, kicking or punching but can also involve inappropriate touching between children.

 In terms of the role of language Guasp (2009) found that 44% of primary teachers had observed homophobic bullying of children in their schools of which 20% related to verbal abuse. Common incidences of such abuse were articulated through teachers hearing expressions such as 'that's so gay or you're so gay'. The employment of 'gay' in this form though is interesting as it may not necessarily relate to a person's sexuality. Teachers report these phrases are, '... very commonly used to express dislike or scorn' so' ... to be gay is gross ... it is interchangeable with crap or stupid' (Guasp, 2009: 7-10). This sort of 'hate speech' invades other spaces such as school classrooms and playgrounds. Problematically, though, 44% of primary school staff who hear such homophobic language do not always respond it. This is not a total surprise especially when one considers that 90% of educational professionals have not received any training on how to tackle homophobic bullying contextualised in this form. (Guasp, 2009). Whilst the level of homophobic bullying of children in primary schools is unclear the picture becomes more opaque when considering the experiences of teachers themselves.

Homosexuality and teachers: School and workplace bullying

The Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations (2003) covers the area of sexuality equality in the workplace. These regulations make it unlawful to discriminate in employment or training on the grounds of sexual orientation. The legislation means that employers face the risk of legal action from employees who:
- have been treated less favourably - in, for example, recruitment, promotion, training or dismissal - than others because they are gay or someone has assumed they are gay, or because they associate with gay people
- are disadvantaged as a group by workplace practice and policy because of their sexual orientation – for instance, they fail to qualify for certain benefits
- have been offended, either intentionally or unwittingly, by homophobic actions or comments

(Summerskill, 2004: 5)

Despite such legislation, the Stonewall and EACH (2007) research found that more than five million people, approximately one in six adult Britons, have observed gay or lesbian colleagues being verbally or physically bullied at work as a direct result of their sexuality (Hunt and Jensen, 2007). Specifically within teaching, the National Union of Teachers (NUT) detail that before entering the profession, the fear of being 'perceived' as gay is enough to deter many men from becoming primary school teachers (Souter, 2009). Of further concern is the effects of homophobic bullying and sexual stigmitisation of those in the profession which leads to:

> low self-esteem; a culture of fear; pupil indiscipline; pupil or staff absenteeism; reduced staff productivity; staff turnover; poor teaching performance; reduced learning outcomes; stress; loss of health; self-harm.

(NASUWT, 2008: 8)

The nature and consequences of such sexual stigma, amongst heterosexuals and homosexuals is profound and its effects are an important issue for researchers and practitioners alike.

Internalised homophobia according to Meyer and Dean (cited in Frost and Meyer, 2009: 97) represents 'the gay person's direction of negative social attitudes toward the self' . For example, Weinburg (1972: 74) observed that the person who 'loathed himself for homosexual urges' from an early age, arrives at a negative attitude towards sexual minorities by a process 'exactly like the one occurring in heterosexuals who hold the prejudice against homosexuals'. In its most extreme incarnations, this can lead to the rejection of one's sexual orientation. This self-rejection can be accentuated in hetronormative school environments as this teacher relates, 'I believe that homosexuality is wrong. I believe that this mollycoddling of so-called gays is wrong' (Guasp, 2009: 12). The same teacher continues, 'I could discuss issues with girls who claim to be gay but I would probably not be very sympathetic' (Ibid). Herek, Gillis and Cogan (2009) in their research highlight the link between sexual self-stigma, psychological distress and well-being and how this mediates self-esteem. It appears that the higher the levels of self-stigma experienced the more levels of self-esteem were reduced, which in turn heightened psychological distress. Further studies by Szymanski and Gupta (2009) assert that this form of distress may also produce symptoms of anxiety and depression. The point sadly evidenced by the work of Jennett (2006: 19) is that the extreme psychological stress caused by this form of ' ... bullying may lead to self-harm and even suicide'.

Homophobia and schools

Research (cited in NASUWT, 2008) conducted over a decade ago by the University of London in 1997 demonstrated that whilst over 99% of schools had anti-bullying policies, only 6% of these included reference to lesbian and gay-related bullying . Lesbian and gay pupils though report they are more likely to feel positive about their school if it explicitly stated that homophobic bullying is against the rules (Guasp,

2009). Previous research by the Thomas Coram Research Unit (2004) intimates that tackling homophobia in schools is best facilitated via a whole-school approach that requires:

> Among other things, leadership at senior management level, a clear identification of the nature and extent of the problem, reference to homophobia in school bullying, a positive school culture that rewards inclusivity and respect and learning, providing support for pupils where needed, and providing staff with professional development opportunities.
>
> (Thomas Coram Research Unit, 2004: 2)

Within classrooms homophobic bullying can be tackled by encouraging attitudes that enable ' ... pupils to reflect on issues of social justice and homophobia using interactive techniques such as drama-based videos, talks by external visitors and theatre' (Ibid). Key resources in this area include *Stand up for us: challenging homophobia in schools* (NHSS/DfES/DoH , 2004) and *Homophobic Bullying – Safe to Learn: embedding anti-bullying work in schools*. (DfCFS & Stonewall, 2007). In addition to these materials, curriculum guidance (QCA, 2005: 1) includes work aimed at year 10 and 11 pupils which aims to 'explore what sexuality is, and consider gender relationships. This unit explores through a variety of discussion triggers and activities a range of issues, including those affecting the LGBT communities. For example, it encourages discussion concerning the age of sexual consent for gay men. Unfortunately, in respects of this study, no equivalent curriculum guidance exists for the primary school sector.

Homosexuality, the media and schools

Two thirds of secondary and three quarters of primary school teachers believe that homophobic language in broadcast media affects the occurrence of homophobic language and bullying in schools (Guasp, 2009). The media trend in the 21st Century oscillates around two foci, those of overt homoeroticism and the sensationalist reporting of homosexuality. In the new millennium it has become 'fashionable' to expose a much younger audience to overt homoeroticism. An example of this trend was observed in 2003 at the MTV Awards the 'infamous' kissing incident of Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera by Madonna in front of a worldwide television audience of over 27 million viewers.

Despite these new trends much media coverage of LGBT issues remains sensationalist in the popular tabloid newspapers. The issue of homophobia in schools is typically dealt with in an unsympathetic and leading approach, *Balls bans children's 'gay' jibes* (The Mail on Sunday, 5th July 2009). Indeed, the choice of language usually indicates the stance the editor has on homosexuality. Other recent examples include, *Teach the pleasure of gay sex to children as young as five, say researchers* (Daily Mail, 20th January 2009); *Assembly to teach pupils of five that Elton John is gay* (Daily Mail, 6th June 2009); *Christian teacher suspended after he objected to training day when asked…what makes you think it's natural to be heterosexual?* (The Mail on Sunday, 26th April 2009). Even the broadsheet newspapers grab the readers' attention by employing the vice of sexuality, *NHS*

manager in lesbian Tai Kwon Do attack at hotel (The Daily Telegraph, 23rd February 2010). Such reporting, widely available to children, demonstrates that a culture of misinformation, or perhaps propaganda, remains rooted in societal consciousness and, in turn, the school environment.

Despite such depressing headlines, it should be noted that positive representations of LGBT communities exist in many media outlets. Much has been achieved in recent years in the acceptance of high profile LGBT celebrities in popular mainstream culture; including arts and culture aimed at or accessed by primary schoolchildren. For example, John Barrowman (actor: Dr. Who); Mark Feehily (singer: Westlife); Gok Wan (presenter: Gok's Fashion Fix); *Hayley Cropper* (character: Coronation Street). Additionally, concurrent gay and lesbian storylines in pre-watershed television dramas such as Eastenders, Coronation Street, Emmerdale and Hollyoaks examine positively the issues of homophobia and battles with sexual identities, to a school-aged audience.

Summary

Whatever may be said of the effects of positive or indeed sensationalist reporting, the sad fact remains that negative reporting combined with the effects of gender identity and inappropriate and offensive language construct a societal discourse where,

> Inequalities, social exclusion and discrimination impact negatively on the health, well-being and achievement of children, young people and adults. Clear links have been identified between children's and young people's experiences of education and schooling, and their achievements, socio-economic position and health as adults…in recent years, there has been growing concern about the impact of homophobia – and homophobic bullying – on children's and young people's physical and emotional well-being and on their attendance and achievement at school. (Warwick et al, 2004: 4)

Research questions

The review of the literature above indicates that defining and conceptualising homophobia in primary schools is under theorised. In an attempt to provide relevant data a small-scale research study was formulated to address four main research questions:
- Is there a standard definition of homophobia?

- How does homophobia manifest itself in primary schools?

- Are homophobic incidents (if any) dealt with effectively in primary schools?

- What are the personal views of the participants on homosexuals in the teaching profession?

Method

The sample

The initial sample was drawn from academic and support staff in the education deanery of a local North-West England university who were engaged with initial teacher training. This sample included final year primary initial teacher trainees; full-time primary PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate of Education), students, teaching staff from local primary schools. This group was targeted by way of a questionnaire that sought to elicit data in respect of the main research questions. From this initial sample 70 completed questionnaires were returned which while offering a wide data set represented only 20% of the initial population.

Subsequent to the collection of the questionnaires all 70 respondents were invited to participate in the interview phase of the research; 27 participants initially responded. However, eventually only nine people actually agreed to participate in the interviews. Due to the sensitivity of the subject matter the nature, form and duration of these qualitative interviews were dictated by the participants themselves. Therefore, this phase of the research included three unstructured interviews where no formal audio recording was allowed. Six other participants indicated their preference for semi-structured group interviews and so two groups, one of three undergraduate students and one of three university academics, participated. It is interesting to note here that the interviews were wide ranging and lengthy, indeed one lasted three and half hours. Whilst this multiplicity of method may have introduced delimitation into the research the combination of questionnaires and self-formulated interview did generate a rich data set that enable the researchers to get 'up close and personal' to the subject of the research. It was certainly the case as Campbell, McNamara and Gilroy recognised that practitioner researcher is 'essentially untidy' (2003: 104) especially, as in this case, it was concerned with what many of the participants perceived to be a difficult issue to externalise.

Data analysis

Data collected from the questionnaires and interview were analysed by employing 'grounded theory', an approach which focuses on 'the discovery of theory from data' (Glaser and Strauss 1967 in Arksey and Knight 1999, p. 162). However, the analysis acknowledged Lewin and Somekh (2005) warning that grounded theory has 'no one truth' or one theory. Grounded theory was employed therefore as 'an integrated theoretical formulation' that offered an understanding of how people, groups and communities experienced and perceived events that occur (Lewin and Somekh, 2005). As such the interview transcripts and questionnaires were subject to open coding from which broad themes emerged within the data. These themes are analysed and discussed in detail below.

Defining and conceptualising homophobia

A conspectus of the data from the questionnaires and interviews denote that homophobia was defined as 'discrimination against a homosexual, whether that is in a physical or verbal manner', 'an irrational fear of, or negative attitudes to people who are homosexual or perceived to be so,' or 'exaggerated/disguised aversion towards men whose sexual orientation is towards their own sex (with the associated behaviour patterns such as aggression/denigration)'. This last response is interesting in terms of identifying male homosexuals as the only recipients of homophobia. Indeed, nearly 7% of participants identified that this term only concerned men and explicitly excluded (lesbian) women. Another 7% of participants related that homophobia was related to sexual intercourse as one participant commented; homophobia is a 'pathological concern about who puts what where – in particular men who might rather have sex with men than women'. Interestingly, only one response established a direct link to homophobia in schools when they detailed that; homophobia is, 'treating a person unfairly or unequally because of their sexuality... [or the] use of words relating to homosexuality as insults or in a derogatory way'.

Gender identity

Within the literature review a link was posited between societal notions of heteronormativity and homophobia in schools, indeed, it was intimated that such normative stereotypes are reinforced in schools. Data from the interviews indicate that homophobic discrimination in society may be based on the predatory image of gay men and moreover in the way they are perceived as promiscuous sexual predators. However, other participants revealed a softer non-threatening concept that of camp gay men discussing in particular specific media personalities. These forms of conceptualisations led one interviewee to believe that '...lesbians are more hated than gay men...people on the whole struggle more with lesbians'.

The research of Smedley (2006) and Skelton (2001) suggests that the form of conceptualisation evidenced above are both commonplace and of importance. These stereotypical ideas formulate males working in school within a subtext of potential paedophilia and gay men therefore encounter a heightened version of this form of bigotry (Brown and Groscup 2009). King (2004: 122) supports this viewpoint concluding that for men:

> Teaching young children is a complex problem and challenge for current social expectations. First, teachers are assumed to be asexual, and when for whatever reason they are discovered not be to asexual, it is a problem. Second, teaching young children is assumed to be *women's work*. When others try to do this work, it creates problems. Third, even though they may be perceived as being *like women*, most of society does not want gay men teaching young children. Gay and lesbian teachers are undesirable because it is assumed that they will influence or recruit their students. More

to the point, gay men are especially troublesome because they are seen as paedophilic.

The end point of such views and irrational fear is as one participant recounts:

> ...I knew a local male nursery teacher who was not allowed to change nappies or bathe young children. (The school was) saying basically, I do not trust you. Discrimination...employer said it was for his protection so that parents would not raise any issue.

Positively, responses from this study did not indicate that 'a person's sexual orientation ... fundamentally predispose them to antisocial or destructive acts'. As one respondent succinctly wrote, 'dangers come to children from many, many directions – it is not the sexuality of a person that has a bearing on their decision to transgress or make perverted decisions'.

Specifically in primary school settings a number of practitioners related that the values of hetronormativity unduly influenced the Foundation Stage in schools. Participants' recounted stories relating to parents fearing that their sons may be 'turned homosexual' by wearing 'pink shirts or playing with certain toys'. They also reported that role-play was closely monitored by some parents (and teachers, fearful of the parents' responses) and this had led to boys being told that they '...can't have the Dora the Explorer toy, that is for girls, you have to have Diago' or that they could not wear a princess outfit. Further encounters with parents had led one to verbalise that she was afraid her daughter was a lesbian because '...she would not wear a skirt in the summer term'. Another parent excluded her son from playing the part of an angel in the nativity play as she believed '...this would encourage him to become gay'. A 'concern' that his son was indeed 'turning into a poofter' encouraged one very angry father to ban his child from wearing a tutu in the role-play area.

It would appear that during the past two decades schools have developed many inclusive practices which address the educational outcomes and social wellbeing of a wide variety of students including factors related to disability, poverty, gender, cultural and linguistic diversity. Disappointingly the findings from this study support those of Hohnke and O'Brien (2008) indicating that the issue of sexuality is not yet fully part of this developing inclusivity agenda.

Homophobic bullying

The participants of the study were asked to categorise the forms that homophobic bullying might take. The following table categorises these responses.

Table 1.1 Categories of homophobia in a school setting

In what ways could homophobia manifest itself in a school setting?	*Respondents identifying this specific or closely-related issue*
Bullying in the classroom and playground between children'	(49%)
Bullying or harassment in the staffroom between staff'; 'discrimination towards staff'	(44%)
Name calling, verbal insults, physical violence'	(69%)
Prevention of a person getting a job within the school'	(23%)
Ignorance of other people and diversity within a religious setting'	(10%)
Exclusion of pupils or staff'; 'being treated differently'	(34%)
Lack of education and talking about homosexuality causes worry or fear about a homosexual person'; 'the hidden curriculum'	(30%)
Parental perception – outside school/playground talk'	(20%)

The data garnered within the questionnaire and at interview support those evidenced in the literature review in that they strongly indicate that homophobia does exist in primary settings. As table 1.1 indicates the most common form of such discrimination is the use of homophobic language. The participants believed that such language is learned behaviour from the media or from the home environment and that use of such negative terminology causes 'damage' and is an 'evil negative thing'. The data also revealed the derogatory employment of the word *gay* by children as young as five years old. The meaning behind such insult, when challenged by one practitioner clearly correlated with Guasp's (2009), research as the reception child stated 'I mean that they are stupid!'. Interestingly, this term was also employed against student teachers, permanent school staff and inanimate objects. For example, children banging and hurting their legs on tables in the classroom resulted in comments such as 'urgggh...that table is gay'. Here, then, early in the primary school no sexual identity was attached to the word gay, rather it was employed as the teachers believed as a facet of learned behaviour. However, and of more concern, for older children sexual identity was an issue. For example, note these comments from children who heard a classmate openly discussing her father's gay relationship. She

was met with responses of 'eeeee, your dad's gay...uuuur!' and classroom chanting of '_____ dad is gay, _____ dad is gay'. Other reported incidents of homophobia outlined the exclusion and verbal persecution of boys who did not enjoy sports, particularly football. The most extreme response in this area articulated by one participant, described a local school that had a *gay pit* in the playground where the dominant majority of pupils pushed those who they deemed 'out of the ordinary'.

It is of further concern to note that only 30% of participants commented they felt incidents of homophobic bullying had been dealt with effectively in schools 'at the time and in an age appropriate manner'. A further third of the participants highlighted a common theme running through the data; this being the comparison to how other incidents of discrimination, for example racist ones, were dealt with. As one teacher related, 'I must admit reporting and recording these (homophobic) incidents was not the same as for a racist incident'. The data also illustrates that it is the class teacher who mostly deals with such aspects of homophobia. At times, though the data does reveal there is some transference of responsibility to senior management: ' [the] head teacher called individual children in the pack into their office one at a time and talked through the effects of bullying on the victim'. Significantly, 10% of respondents stated that trainee teachers were expected to deal with such incidents which often left them unprepared and feeling exposed whilst out on placement.

More worrying, it seems, was that 17% of participants reported that the issue of homophobic name calling was simply ignored or glossed over. In cases which the participants witnessed, 40% of teachers admitted to appearing to 'not hear' the abuse. One teacher stated that, 'I'm not convinced that even some of the teaching staff view the use of the term gay as a form of discrimination that should be tackled'. These findings support those of Guasp (2009) and DePalma and Jennett (2007) who found this sort of ambivalent school reaction commonplace.

These findings suggest that much more is needed in terms of initial teacher training and continuing professional development to address the issue of homophobia in our primary schools. It seems that teachers both new and experienced need assistance firstly to understand the importance of these issues and second, training in the most effective way of dealing with this form of discrimination. Additionally, the management of the school must take a more forthright lead on homophobic bullying and support the staff not least through the articulation of a clear school policy.

Homosexuality and teachers: School and workplace bullying

The study provides data that enables an initial analysis of the opinions of practitioners in relation to homosexual teachers working within the profession. The findings illustrates that the majority of the respondents saw the issue of homosexuals working in the teaching profession as an equal opportunities issue and related it to the wider aspects of the qualities of a good teacher. This was succinctly summarised by this participant:

> I would hope for anyone teaching in a primary school to be suitably
> qualified, enjoy facilitating children's learning, have a good rapport

with children, a good communicator across generations, a team player but a strong sense of self. In the context of those qualities race, gender, class, sexuality or dis/ability should be immaterial.

In the main the data reveal that the majority of participants held positive views towards homosexual teachers. For example, some participants considered the merits of having homosexuals in the primary sector. As one teacher commented ' [homosexual males] are usually an added bonus in primary schools, as they relate easily to a dominantly female teacher group and at the same time, provide a male role model'. Another related that 'I have always enjoyed the fact that a man working in a caring profession often challenges children's perceptions of the male role!

Of concern though was that some practitioners expressed neutral of negative views. Note for example these comments:

> 'Theoretically can't say it bothers me but I can see problems in terms of staff cohesion.'

> 'I am ambivalent. I think it is a very complex issue which needs full and proper debate before I can make up my mind.'

> 'I wouldn't advise homosexuals to pursue a career in primary teaching, unless they are prepared to hide their sexuality.'

Within the data sets two additional themes were highlighted which should sow seeds of concern for all involved in education. These being the linking of gay teachers to paedophilia and the influence of faith-based beliefs on the issue of homosexuality in schools.

On the issue of homosexuality and paedophilia

As discussed in the work of Smedley (2006) and Skelton (2001), men working in school often suffer from the subtext of being potential paedophiles and that gay men seem to get a heightened version of this suggestion. The responses from the study positively do not directly make a link between homosexuality and paedophilia. As an earlier participant stated '...a person's sexual orientation does not fundamentally predispose them to antisocial or destructive acts'. However, and of concern is that some participants related that some sections of society have 'the appalling assumption that such people incline towards the abusive'. Whilst this is a limited data set the concern here is that societal perceptions may lead to gay teachers deciding not to be open about their sexuality in school settings. This participant articulates the reasoning behind such decisions

> Gay men and women, particularly those in education tend to keep quiet about their sexuality. It is *invisible*. This can marginalise their lives and particularly in small primary schools make them extremely carefully *[sic]* about the information they give to colleagues and children.

On the issue of religion and faith

An issue that dominated that data was the issue of homosexuality, religion and faith-based schools. These findings of the study correlate well with the research of Wilkinson (2004) and Laythe et al (2002) which reported a strong relationship between religiousness and homophobia and that religious fundamentalism is a significant predictor of prejudice against lesbians and gay men (cited in Balkin et al, 2009). In the present research study 26% of participants indicated a barrier to tackling homophobia may relate to faith-based issues.   One participant wrote passionately of the 'appalling assumption' that since homosexuality is 'inherently wrong (because *the Bible tells us so*), then the presence of homosexual teachers in primary schools would somehow taint those who are being taught'. It is beyond the remit of this small study to fully analyse the relationship between faith and homosexuality; suffice to say that the findings indicate that it does have a bearing on how homophobic and homosexuality issues are dealt with in a school setting. Such barriers are succinctly articulated by this participant, who expresses their dilemma in relation to homosexuality and Christianity,

> As part of my faith, I believe that men and women were created to love each other and through marriage to pro create...as part of one loving relationship. As a Christian, life is about the choices we make about how to live our lives. I believe that (choosing to) being gay is choosing to be apart from God and not to follow what his word says about relationships. As a Christian I believe Jesus came to save sinners...like myself. I am conscious of God's Love for all. He loves sinners but hates the wrong and sin that separates up *[sic]* from him. I suppose I live by this principle...loving people but disagreeing with homosexual *[sic]*.I have friends who are gay that I love very much. I don't agree with their sexuality but love them as people.

Conclusions: recommendations, implications and suggestions

The findings of the study strongly indicate the need for the inclusion of anti-homophobia work in the induction of students entering teacher training institutions. As future teachers, the issue of how the beliefs of students may affect their role in school needs to be addressed. Provision should be made within the initial teacher training and within continuing professional development courses to address the issue of homosexuality and homophobia in schools. Training must take account of how homophobia is best dealt with in school - be that as the recipient or as a teacher dealing with such incidents. In relation to schools themselves the work that has been progressed in secondary schools should be extended to primary schools and the issue of homophobic language needs to be tackled as a matter of urgency. Beyond this Ofsted guidelines should be revised so that inspectors can specifically monitor incidents of homophobia and schools policy in relation to sexuality.

The paper commenced by outlining religious bigotry it seems fitting therefore that it should end with an inclusive religious comment.

> 'Everyone is an insider, there are no outsiders – whatever their beliefs, whatever their colour, gender or sexuality'
> (Archbishop Desmond Tutu, cited in Jennett, 2004: 2)

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