Sexual orientation, sexual identities and homophobia in schools

All children and young people should feel safe and included within the school environment, and this should be highlighted by the school's express commitment to equal opportunities, anti-bullying and anti-discriminatory practice. Personal, social and health education (PSHE) and Citizenship – including sex and relationships education (SRE) – should support and reflect this ethos and be sensitive to the diversity and development of sexual identities.

This factsheet supports schools to challenge homophobia and develop PSHE and SRE policy and practice which addresses sexual identities and is relevant to all children and young people.

This factsheet outlines the following:

1. Why schools should address homophobia, sexual orientation and sexual identity
2. Promoting a whole-school ethos
3. Challenging homophobia and bullying
4. Addressing diversity and difference through the curriculum
5. Useful contacts

Why schools should address homophobia, sexual orientation and sexual identity

I found myself in the playground, with 30 or 40 kids surrounding me, shouting at me. Not one single teacher came and intervened. (Young woman quoted in YWCA 2004)

A significant minority of young people have feelings for people of the same sex or identify themselves as lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB). For many of these young people, school is neither a safe nor a supportive environment. Some LGB young people experience negative attitudes from staff and pupils, and many feel their needs are not taken into account in schools. Disproportionately high numbers of LGB young people experience bullying, including verbal

and physical abuse both in and out of the classroom.

LGB young people report receiving little support from school staff (Buston 2004, YWCA 2004, Mason and Palmer 1996). They may also feel excluded from SRE because they feel it is not relevant to them. Often the focus on reproduction or on physical health in the teaching about HIV has 'downplayed important psychological and emotional aspects of sexual orientation, for example issues of discrimination and stigma' (Buston 2004).

It has been well documented that these experiences lead to LGB young people missing opportunities and having low self-esteem. They may:
- feel different, lonely, shame, isolated and excluded
- deny their true feelings
- fear being found out
- have high rates of school absenteeism
- self-harm and display signs of suicidal behaviour or thoughts (Buston 2004).

Homophobia, exclusion and the invisibility of LGB identities can lead young people to be reluctant to seek help, emotional support and sexual health advice when they need it. It is important for all young people to be able to approach issues of sexual identity without negative prejudice, fear or stigma. They need to be able to look at issues of fairness and equality, and to

be aware of the damage that discrimination can cause.

Tackling homophobia in schools is an integral part of wider strategies to secure the safety and welfare of young people, improve standards of attainment and achievement and promote equality and diversity in the school.

Promoting a whole-school approach

I remember feeling so alone at school, I had no-one to talk to that I could trust and I tried on several occasions to commit suicide. (Young woman quoted in YWCA 2004)

Recent changes in legislation and guidance represent positive developments in wider society for LGB people. These changes include the equalisation of the age of consent to 16 regardless of sexual orientation and the repeal of Section 28, as well as new employment laws and the proposed legislation on the legal recognition of same-sex partnerships. Schools have the responsibility to develop a positive 'homophobia-free' whole-school ethos, which acknowledges diversity and encourages respect for difference. This ethos will help to ensure a supportive and safe environment for all young people.

In order to achieve a supportive and safe environment schools must do more

than just challenge overtly homophobic behaviour and language. Although vitally important, this alone will not change the underlying school culture. School policies must also recognise specific discrimination and bullying experienced by LGB young people – both male and female, and including those from black, minority ethnic and religious communities. Equal opportunities policies must apply to all areas of the school and its practice, while SRE within the PSHE and Citizenship framework must be responsive to LGB young people's needs.

Schools need to consider how to involve and engage all members of the school community, including parents, governors, ancillary and support staff, teachers and pupils. It must have a wider focus than just the 'problem' end of the issue, such as bullying, discrimination and the content of SRE. It should also present a balanced picture of sexual orientation. This can be achieved through:
- the participation of LGB parents in the life of the school
- supporting LGB staff
- providing positive role models
- creating an inclusive curricula
- celebrating diversity.

Schools need to ensure that their personnel policies do not discriminate in employment matters on the grounds of sexual orientation, and that all members of staff, whatever their sexual orientation, are valued for the contribution they make to the success of the school.

Challenging homophobia and bullying

I would get called names like 'man head' and 'dirty dyke'…I used to get pelted with stones to and from school… (Young woman quoted in YWCA 2004)

Schools can be described as microcosms of society, and it is fair to assume that in

any community individuals will hold a wide spectrum of values and opinions – some of which maybe prejudiced. This may include 'negative and/or fearful attitudes about … homosexuality' (Sprecher and McKinney, 1993) known as homophobia.

Homophobia can be demonstrated in a range of responses – such as discrimination, bullying, homophobic comments and abuse – towards those who have, or who are perceived to have, feelings for those of the same sex.

Equal opportunities in the classroom

Discrimination in schools can affect children and young people's opportunities to develop and realise their full potential. Equal opportunities within education is defined as:
- providing for all pupils
- being mindful of the difficulties that some groups can face, and ensuring that any obstacles to them are removed
- being aware of personal prejudices and stereotypical views, and avoiding labels related to these
- valuing each pupil's worth (DfES 2004).

DfES advises that each school should develop a statement of their commitment to equal opportunities that should become part of the whole-school ethos and permeate throughout the curriculum (2004).

Preventing bullying

The issue of bullying in schools, including homophobic bullying, is now a top priority. Bullying impacts negatively on the education and school experience of those targeted. It also affects those who bully and those who witness bullying. Guidance for schools has been developed on bullying (DfEE 2000a) and the Anti-Bullying Alliance (Fowler 2004) has

highlighted two components to effective anti-bullying practice: creating a safe environment and dealing with bullying incidents.

Creating a safe environment
In order to create a safe environment, it is important that a school has an effective anti-bullying strategy in place. This strategy should include a range of the following:
- development of an effective whole-school policy that is based on shared values, beliefs and attitudes that inhibit bullying
- use of dedicated curriculum and tutorial time to discuss issues associated with bullying
- use of peer support approaches
- regular canvassing of pupil's views and experiences
- training staff to reinforce anti-bullying practice.

The most effective interventions are:
- sustained over the long term
- developed with staff, pupils, parents, carers and partners in the community
- monitored and evaluated as circumstances change
- supported by a school ethos that inhibits bullying and promotes empathy and respect for diversity (Oliver and Candappa 2003).

Dealing with bullying incidents
Approaches to dealing with bullying incidents include:
- finding out what has happened
- giving the child who has been bullied an opportunity to express their feelings whilst keeping them safe
- developing a means for the children who have been bullying to take responsibility for their actions and, often, giving them an opportunity to take some restorative action.

The Anti-Bullying Alliance believes that in very serious cases punishment, including exclusion, is appropriate, but it should be used as a last resort.

Challenging homophobic behaviour and comments

Personal preparation for challenging homophobic behaviour and comments can include:

- developing an awareness of your own values and thoughts on homophobia
- developing skills that will help with challenging behaviour – including listening, summarising and using open-ended questions
- not making assumptions about the sexual orientation of groups or individuals
- using neutral terminology such as 'partner' instead of boyfriend and girlfriend
- not problematising LGB issues – be prepared to talk about relationships, emotions and identity, not simply about physical sexual health
- ensuring that you have support, so that if you get upset or discouraged, you can discuss this with a sympathetic colleague
- reflecting on and monitoring your own feelings, and being realistic in your expectations of yourself and the young people you work with.

To challenging homophobic behaviour:

- intervene when you hear personal attacks
- challenge the behaviour or statement rather than the opinion, belief or whole person
- avoid polarising the situation by countering homophobia with an opposing view – a more productive approach would be to give pupils an opportunity to examine the 'offending' view by saying 'Let's look at how someone might feel if you called them that …'
- challenge myths and offer a different perspective
- draw out the discussion by using open-ended questions
- use activities which encourage empathy, for instance by exploring how it would feel to have certain experiences
- recognise how people deny or refuse to accept others' beliefs, activities or orientations
- ensure that everyone who wants to speak can do so, if necessary remind pupils of the ground rules
- do not start discussions at the end of a session, allow pupils time to consider the situation or statement, explore the effect of possible outcomes and plan the best way forward
- always try and bring the situation to a conclusion
- if you know or suspect that someone is being bullied or harassed, talk with them at the end of the session
- be prepared for young people to approach you at the end of the session – be supportive and have details of outside agencies that could help.

(Adapted from a checklist by Max Biddulph in Ray, C and Went, D (1995) *Good Practice in Sex Education: A sources book for schools*)

Different schools will adopt different approaches based on their ethos, values and behaviour policy. It may be helpful to think of a continuum of approaches from which schools can select the most appropriate for the circumstances of the case. For more information please refer to *Making Schools Safer: Effective Anti-bullying Strategies* (Fowler 2004).

The NHSS resource *Stand Up for Us* (2004) also includes a comprehensive checklist of measures and activities that will help schools to effectively address homophobia and homophobic bullying. It is intended to help schools challenge homophobia in the context of developing an inclusive, safer and more succesful school environment for all.

Challenging homophobic behaviour and comments

In too many secondary schools homophobic attitudes among pupils often go unchallenged. The problem is compounded when derogatory terms about homosexuality are used in everyday language in school and their use passes unchallenged by staff. Where problems arise, staff have often had insufficient guidance on the interpretation of schools values and what constitutes unacceptable language and behaviour. (Ofsted 2002)

Challenging homophobic behaviour or comments within or out of the classroom can often feel difficult. Nevertheless, it is extremely important this is done consistently since it sends out the message that this type of discrimination is unacceptable and offensive. As a guide to when we should confront homophobia it may be helpful to ask yourself, 'If this were a comment about race or disability would I challenge it?' It is always helpful to be prepared to deal with these issues and think about the methods you would use to challenge.

Addressing diversity and difference through the curriculum

In many ways the school system is geared towards making people the same instead of helping them value and enjoy the diversity of different people. (Young man quoted in Blake 2003)

PSHE and Citizenship

There are a range of core emotional and social qualities that can be nurtured through PSHE and Citizenship to promote inclusion and reduce inequalities, and which are important when learning about different sexual identities. These include:

- supporting children and young people to develop empathy with others (and a sense of fairness and justice)
- developing a positive sense of self
- recognising how emotions impact on decision-making and beliefs
- understanding the effects of prejudice, discrimination and bullying on mental health and stigma
- developing an understanding of rights and responsibilities
- developing an acceptance of diversity and difference
- developing participation and active citizenship skills (Blake and Frances 2004).

Law relating to SRE

In school settings the law relating to SRE is contained in the 1996 Education Act and the 2000 Learning and Skills Act. In summary, the SRE elements in the National Curriculum Science Order across all key stages are mandatory. Every school should have a written SRE policy, which is open to Ofsted inspection, and school governors must have regard for the DfES's *Sex and Relationships Education Guidance* (DfEE 2000b).

In 2003 the repeal of Section 28 came into force. Although it never applied to schools, many teachers and other professionals were confused as to what they could and could not say about sexual orientation. Schools also felt hampered in their ability to tackle homophobic bullying. It should be noted that there is no constraint on discussing these matters in school. Furthermore, LGB young people have the same need to access support and advice, and have equal right to confidential services. For more information see EACH's *Out of the Shadow* (Charlesworth 2004).

Guidance on SRE

I had no idea that we should be using protection, how are other young lesbians meant to know this? (Young woman quoted in YWCA 2004)

The SRE Guidance (DfEE 2000b) emphasises best practice by recommending that SRE is planned and delivered as part of PSHE and Citizenship. This guidance highlights that school policies should be inclusive of all pupils and states the following regarding sexual identity and sexual orientation:

It is up to schools to make sure that the needs of all pupils are met in their programmes. Young people, whatever their developing sexuality, need to feel that sex and relationship education is relevant to them and sensitive to their needs. …teachers should be able to deal honestly and sensitively with sexual orientation, answer appropriate questions and offer support.

The Sex Education Forum believes that comprehensive SRE is the learning about sex, sexuality, emotions, relationships, sexual health and ourselves. It should be:

- an integral part of the lifelong learning process, beginning in early childhood and continuing throughout adult life
- an entitlement for all children and young people, which meets the needs of boys as well as girls; those who are heterosexual, lesbian, gay or bisexual; those with physical, learning or emotional difficulties; and those with a religious or faith tradition – in other words, *everyone* whatever their background, community or circumstance
- provided within a holistic context of emotional and social development across all settings such as PSHE and Citizenship (SEF 2003).

Sometimes I got really angry about the fact that the teacher never mentioned gay people, but mostly I just felt as though it was my own fault for being this way. (Young man quoted in Blake 2003)

The 2002 Ofsted report on the provision of SRE, states very clearly that schools have a responsibility to ensure that SRE meets all pupils' needs and that diversity and difference are valued and respected. The report also lists suggested learning outcomes for each Key Stage:

- By the end of Key Stage 1 pupils will be able to 'recognise similarities and differences between themselves and others and treat others with sensitivity, and have considered how their feelings and actions have an impact on other people'.
- By the end of Key Stage 2 pupils will have considered 'the diversity of lifestyles, a wide range of different family arrangements and why being different can provoke bulling and why this is unacceptable'.
- By the end of Key Stage 3 pupils will be able to 'be tolerant of the diversity of personal, social and sexual preference in relationships and will have considered the importance of respecting difference in relation to gender and sexuality and the unacceptability of prejudice and homophobic bullying'.

Sexual orientation, sexual identities and homophobia in school – A checklist for action

Whole school

- Is there a whole-school commitment to anti-discriminatory practice, equal opportunities and anti-bullying?
- Are young people included in the development of policies?
- Are teachers confident and supported to tackle homophobia and bullying?
- Are there opportunities for staff training in these issues?
- Are there anti-bullying strategies in place?
- Is there a clear values statement that includes a reference to unacceptable language and behaviour?

Assembly

- Does the school hold assemblies that promote anti-discrimination, celebrate diversity and acknowledge difference?

The curriculum

- Does the school have SRE, PSHE and Citizenship policies, with diversity and difference, prejudice and discrimination, equality and rights covered within them?
- Does SRE cover all sexual identities and relationships?
- Are teachers confident and supported to deal sensitively with different sexual identities in the curriculum?
- Are resources inclusive of young LGB people?
- Are there positive images of LGB people and different family lifestyles in other elements of the curriculum, for example history, literature, RE?
- Does the school use outside visitors who talk about being lesbian, gay or bisexual?

Pastoral care

- What support is offered to young LGB people within the school?
- Are there helplines and support services specific to the needs of young LGB people advertised within the school and as part of SRE?

- By the end of Key Stage 4 pupils will have considered 'their developing sexual identity and feel confident and comfortable with it'.

A variety of teaching resources have been developed to support work in this area. Please contact the organisations in 'Useful contacts' for more details.

Useful contacts

Sex Education Forum
The Forum produces a number of resources to support SRE. Its website offers a number of free resources to download and provides a series of regularly updated resources lists.
Tel: 020 7843 1901
Web: www.ncb.org.uk/sef

Avert
This international AIDS and medical research charity has a comprehensive website featuring over 100 pages on HIV/AIDS, including sections aimed specifically at young people.
Tel: 01403 210202
Web: www.avert.org.uk

Centre for HIV and Sexual Health
This national sexual health promotion and HIV prevention organisation produces resources and leaflets and runs training courses on a range of sexual health issues related to gay and lesbian young people.
Tel: 0114 226 1913
Web: www.sexualhealthsheffield.co.uk

ChildLine
ChildLine is the free 24-hour helpline for children and young people in the UK. Children and young people can call the helpline about any problem, at any time – day or night
Tel: 0800 1111
Web: www.childline.org.uk

EACH
Educational Action Challenging Homophobia is a registered charity supporting young people affected by homophobia and providing training to the professionals who work with them across the UK. EACH's freephone number is open 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday and 10am to noon on Saturdays.
Tel: 0808 1000 143
Web: www.eachaction.org.uk

FFLAG
Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays is a national voluntary organisation dedicated to supporting parents and their gay, lesbian and bisexual sons and daughters. FFLAG provides confidential helplines and runs parents' groups across the UK.
Tel: 01454 852 418
Web: www.fflag.org.uk

Education for All
An initiative led by Stonewall, FFLAG and LGBT Scotland working with a broad-based coalition of voluntary and statutory organisations, local authorities and trades unions to enable schools and colleges across the UK to effectively challenge homophobia and create a safe learning environment. For further information contact Stonewall.

Stonewall
Stonewall is an organisation which campaigns for equal rights for lesbians, gay men and bisexuals. One current campaign focuses on challenging homophobic bullying in schools. The Stonewall website gives details of relevant organisations and resources.
Tel: 020 7881 9440
Web: www.stonewall.org.uk

LGCM

The Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement is a UK-based international charity, open to all who believe in the equal participation of lesbian, gay and bisexual people in the church. LGCM supports individual lesbian and gay Christians, wherever possible in local groups, and works towards positive acceptance of lesbian and gay relationships.
Tel: 020 7739 1249
Web: www.lgcm.org.uk

London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard

A 24-hour telephone service which aims to provide information, support and referral service for lesbians, gay men and bisexual people from all backgrounds throughout the UK.
Tel: 020 7837 7324
Web: www.llgs.org.uk

National Healthy School Standard

The NHSS, sponsored by DfES and DH, offers comprehensive support to help schools address inclusion issues for the whole community, and to challenge bullying effectively.
Tel: 020 7837 7324
Web: www.llgs.org.uk

School's Out

School's Out is a national organisation which aims to provide both a formal and informal support network for all lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transpersons in education. School's Out offers training and classroom workshops and resources, and also campaigns on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transperson issues as they affect education and those in education.
Helplines: 01582 451 424 (Male worker) or 020 7635 0476 (Female worker)
Web: www.schools-out.org.uk

PACE

PACE responds to the emotional, mental and physical health needs of lesbians and gay men in the greater London area through counselling, therapy, HIV prevention and training.
Tel: 020 7700 1323
Web: www.pacehealth.org.uk

Peer Support Project

The Peer Support Project offers advice, information and support to all lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning young people aged 25 and under. Young people can contact the project by email, post or a helpline (open Saturdays between 1pm and 3pm).
Tel: 0800 169 7384
Web: www.pspboard.org.uk

Terrence Higgins Trust

THT is the leading HIV and AIDS charity in the UK, and the largest in Europe. It was one of the first charities to be set up in response to the HIV epidemic and has been at the forefront of the fight against HIV and AIDS ever since. THT Direct Helpline provides HIV information, advice and support.
Tel: 0845 1221 200
Web: www.tht.org.uk

YWCA England and Wales

YWCA campaigns on issues affecting lesbian and bisexual young women. It has 18 projects where lesbian and bisexual young women can receive confidential support in a friendly environment.
Tel: 01865 304 200
Web: www.ywca.org.uk

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