

Create Equality in Education Project *Draft Report*

Stockwell Park High School – Tackling Homophobia

*National Union of Teachers
February 2004*

Chapter 1

Introduction

The NUT is currently involved in a research project with three European partners. The project is funded by the European Commission and will run until August 2004. The aim of the Create Equality in Education project (CREE) is to identify the factors that make a school's equal opportunities activity successful and to raise awareness for anti-discrimination initiatives in schools. As part of the project each partner will investigate equal opportunity activities in four schools - the first school investigation was completed in June 2003 with three further studies completed by February 2003. This interim report represents the findings of the investigation into attempts by Stockwell Park High School to tackle homophobia.

The school

The NUT approached the school in October 2003 and the teacher contacted was enthusiastic about the school taking part in the project.

Stockwell Park High School is a mixed 11-16 comprehensive school that serves a very disadvantaged area of South London. There are over 800 pupils at the school and more boys than girls attend the school. The proportion of pupils at the school who are eligible for free school meals is above the national average.

The majority of pupils at the school come from a minority ethnic background. Almost half of the pupils are from homes where English is not the first language and pupils speak more than 50 different languages. The school was found in its last Ofsted inspection in February 2002 to be an improving school with "a good capacity to improve further".

The activity under investigation

The school was recommended to the NUT by a member of the Union's Working Party on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Diversity and Equality in Education.

The school has sought to implement a whole school approach to tackling homophobia and promoting respect in the school. The school secured funding from the local police force and hired three professional trainers. The trainers came from a consultancy firm specialising in LGBT issues called Chrysalis,

The activity the school put in place promised "support for teachers in developing skills and techniques for tackling homophobia and hate crime". The professional trainers sought to assist teachers by running training sessions to discuss the issue of homophobia and by providing support for teachers to discuss these issues in the classroom.

The trainers also had time with each class in the school in order to discuss the issue of homophobia and the consequences that homophobia can have upon individuals. Information on how this work could be followed up with pupils was also provided in the form of lesson plans that could be used in Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE).

Methodology

The investigation in the school formally took place between November 2003 and February 2003. Before the investigation took place a full literature search was conducted in order to gain an understanding of the issue and previous academic work.

During the investigations interviews with carried out with the Head of Year who had responsibility for the tackling homophobia project. A discussion group with pupils was conducted in order to explore the issues in greater depth. The participants in the discussion group were chosen by the school and came from the School Council. The pupils came from years 10 and 11.

The full discussion guide that was prepared for the group is attached as Appendix A.

After the discussion group had been transcribed a short questionnaire was designed for teachers in the school. The questionnaire was deliberately short in order to encourage as many teachers as possible to complete the form. The questionnaire also sought to replicate questions that had been asked of teachers in previous academic studies.

There is further research work still ongoing in the school. A formal meeting with the trainers who worked in the school has been organised but it was no possible to meet before the Conference in Girona.

The academic context

There is a growing academic interest in the experience of lesbian, gay and bisexual students in schools and the need to combat homophobia in education (Epstein: 1994, Mac An Ghall: 1994; D' Augelli: 1996; Epstein and Johnson: 1998, Rivers: 2001).

The academic research that has been undertaken points to the prevalence of homophobia in schools and its effects both upon students who are LGBT and those who are simply perceived by others to be so. Research in the USA found that students who were LGB and who suffered high levels of victimisation at school reported high levels of substance misuse, suicide attempts and sexual risk behaviours (Bontempo et al). One study conducted in London in the 1980s found that one in five gay and lesbian youth had attempted suicide as a direct result of being lesbian or gay (Trenchard and Warren, 1984).

A great deal of the academic literature has focussed on the marginalisation or even elimination of gay and lesbian identities within the classroom (Mac an Ghail, 1994). In many schools there is a presumption of heterosexuality with homophobic practices regarded as normal or as a nature part in the development of adolescent boys.

Schools have a responsibility to tackle homophobic bullying. The NUT welcomed the publication of the DfES anti-bullying guidance 'Don't Suffer in Silence', which provided information about establishing a whole school policy on bullying, how schools can find out about the level and nature of bullying, strategies to combat bullying, and working with parents and the wider community. The publication said that a school policy on bullying "should be short, succinct and written in a language that everyone understands" and include a definition of bullying which includes "racist, sexist and homophobic bullying".

The 'Don't Suffer in Silence' anti-bullying guidance also contains a section explicitly on bullying related to sexual orientation with suggests strategies such as:

- covering homophobic bullying in INSET days on bullying in general;
- guaranteeing confidentiality and appropriate advice to lesbian and gay pupils;
- challenging homophobic language;
- exploring instances of diversity and difference; and
- exploring pupils' understanding of their use of homophobic language.

In addition, the DFEE circular 10/99 'Social Inclusion: Pupil Support' said that schools need to deal with all forms of bullying, including homophobic bullying. The circular says:

"The emotional distress caused by bullying in whatever form - be it racial, or as a result of the child's appearance, behaviour or special educational needs, or related to sexual orientation - can prejudice school achievement, lead to lateness or truancy and, in extreme cases, end with suicide." (Para 4.29)

It is to be expected that where schools do not meet their obligations, students and/or their parents will become more inclined to initiate legal action. Some schools have already faced legal action as a result of their failure to protect students who were not from homophobic bullying.

Stockwell Park High School

The work of Stockwell Park High School in making tackling homophobia a priority is interesting on many levels. The work in the school comes at a time when some significant advances in the campaign for LGBT equality have been achieved. Section 28, which prohibited local authorities from promoting homosexuality, was abolished in England in 2003. The Government stated its intention to legislate to allow civil partnerships between lesbian and gay couples and announced a new project aimed at tackling homophobia in education. Furthermore, in December 2003 the Government following regulations from the European Union put in place legal protection at work for gay and lesbian employees.

The issue of sexuality in school is still a controversial issue in education. For some people different sexualities are a religious or moral issue rather than an issue of simple equality. Some people have the impression that simply discussing different sexualities amongst young people might have the effect of influencing the future behaviour of those young people.

The research conducted in Stockwell Park reveal a series of aims that the school had in mind when initiating the work on the subject of homophobia. The initial interview with the teacher who took the lead on the project revealed a series of connected aims when looking at the activity. These aims included the need to “build positive awareness of LGBT people” by creating positive images and addressing the “pupils use of words and name calling”.

This report will evaluate the perceived success of the activity through the three aims outlined above. The evidence collected through interviews, the group discussion and through the questionnaire of teachers will be used to back any claims or arguments made in the report. It is important to remember that this is an interim report and that some key stakeholders in the project are yet to have full input into the report.

The students' view of equal opportunities

The discussion group sought to examine the views of students regarding equal opportunities in general and how they operate in Stockwell Park High School. The students were asked at the beginning of the discussion group to define what they thought the term equal opportunities actually meant. The comments from students included:

'Being treated fairly and having equal rights.'

'Everyone gets the same opportunities in life no matter what colour you are, what sex you are, or anything, you still get what the other person gets.'

The students showed themselves to be extremely aware of the importance of equal opportunities and why it was especially important in an educational setting. The students were very positive about the emphasis that the school places on equal opportunities. When asked about their views commented included:

'I think that the school is doing a really good job.'

'It is a mixed school – a multicultural school. Gives everyone in the school and equal opportunity.'

'Very different from other schools. We are all just mixed up and you can learn from everyone else.'

The research attempted to gain an understanding of the views of students across the different areas of equality. The students showed support for the concept of equal opportunities across the different equality areas. Given the multicultural nature of the school and the students in the discussion group, the students showed a real awareness of the problem of racism. Some of the students, particularly the female students, were able to connect experiences of racism with the prejudice displayed towards gay and lesbian people. The

students in the discussion group were able to connect how the prejudice of individuals can affect the life chances of other people.

The role of teachers in promoting equal opportunities

There was some hostility from members of staff to working on issues relating to homosexuality in the school. There was a disappointingly low response rate to the questionnaire. However there were some important comments made by teachers in the survey that are worth examining.

Of the five teachers who responded to the survey all of them responded positively to the question about whether they had witnessed homophobic bullying in the school. When asked all of the teachers felt that they had the skills to be able to challenge the homophobia that they witnessed in the school.

In response to a further question about the role of the teacher in combating homophobia three out of five questions said that they were very confident discussing homosexuality in the classroom while the remaining two teachers said that they would be confident.

Although the survey response rate was very low all of the teachers felt that the school should play an active role in tackling homophobia.

Positive Awareness

The academic research that has been conducted on the subject of homophobia in schools has found that homophobic language is extremely prevalent in schools. Many teachers report that homophobic insults are frequently used in schools with the word 'gay' used to describe anything that is seen as bad or defective.

Some young people are brought up to see homosexuality as wrong while other young people are affected by attitudes and opinions that exist in their

community. It is important to recognise that the negative opinions of LGBT people that exist can make it difficult for schools and other similar organisations to challenge homophobia. However, with new legal rights for lesbian and gay individuals and the increasing portrayal of lesbian and gay people in the mass media there is evidence that some attitudes and negative opinions are beginning to change.

In the initial interview with the teacher responsible for citizenship in Stockwell Park there was an acknowledgement that many pupils did not see homophobia or the expression of it as wrong. Put quite simply the attitude was that homosexuality was wrong and that therefore there was nothing wrong with expressing homophobic attitudes.

The activity that was initiated in Stockwell Park sought to raise awareness of the impact that homophobia can have upon individuals. It is important to state that homophobia can have a serious effect upon many individuals and that somebody does not necessarily have to be gay or lesbian to suffer from homophobic prejudice or behaviour.

The evidence from the discussion group shows that the activity was successful in making students think about their attitudes towards LGBT individuals. Diversity training is not necessarily about changing or altering negative or discriminatory opinions but in ensuring that those opinions are not expressed in ways that could cause harm or upset to other individuals.

The discussion group sought to get the views of students towards gay and lesbian people in different ways. The students were presented with statement cards in order to generate discussion and comments. One of the cards stated *'Gay people shouldn't work with children'*. When presented with this card there were loud 'wrong' comments coming from members of the group. It is interesting to note that the most vociferous members of the group on this issue were female. However, the further comments made by members of the group were interesting in the issues that they raised. The following comments were made by female members of the group:

'That is prejudice. That is discrimination.'

'As long as they don't do nothing wrong with children, yeah then its fine.'

'If they are happy to be gay, then they should not worry about what people think of them. They should be worrying about what they think of themselves.'

'In my family, they told me, that man and woman, not man and man or woman to woman, but that is what they teach me but I make up my decisions about what I like .. how I see towards them. Not because a person is gay I'm going to go oh you're gay you better stay away from me or whatever. It is not like a contagious disease or anything, it is just they are attracted to the same sex.'

The comments from the male members of the group although not hostile could broadly be categorised as toleration as long as the individuals did not reveal themselves to be gay or lesbian among young people. There was an overt fear of the sexual nature of gay and lesbian people. The comments included:

'Two sides to interpret that, my opinion yeah god made Adam and Eve not Adam and Steve you get me. No I'm not being prejudiced or nothing. I'm not being prejudiced that is my opinion. But me as I see a gay person as a normal person I see anybody as a normal person. If you want to be gay congratulations to you it don't hurt me. As long as it don't affect no children in your path of doing what your doing. '

'Gay people should be allowed to work with children as long as like they don't like bring sexual or whatever around the children you get me. As long as they keep their personal lives their personal lives I've got nothing wrong with gay people. A gay person is just a normal person who is just attracted to the same sex you get me. Me personally that's not what I believe in cause of the way I was raised, as a Christian. I don't have nothing against gay people as long as they like don't portray personal stuff like, you get what I am saying.'

The comments from the students showed that part of the training in actually meeting gay and lesbian people had been valuable in changing opinions and stereotypes. As part of the training programme students had been introduced to gay and lesbian people including people in non-traditional roles such as police officers. The reactions from the members of the discussion group to this aspect of the training programme was positive with comments including:

'The school is basically showing us that gay people are intelligent, and able.'

'Introducing a new direction to say that gay people is alright.'

'Most people had like mixed emotions about gay or lesbian people. People realised that gay people, gay or lesbians, are just like me and you. There is nothing different.'

'I think it has had a positive effect. Before like if I heard about a gay or lesbian person I'd be like er that person is different from us but it has kind of enlightened me to show that gay and lesbian people are normal people. They do everything the same as us and they should be respected and given equal opportunities.'

The students were introduced to gay and lesbian people as a way of attempting to break down the stereotypes that many people have about by presenting positive role models. However, the students said that some students had reacted negatively to meeting gay and lesbian people. One person said:

'I know a boy and we were sitting where we had to discuss homophobia and when the policeman actually said he was gay he became agitated and he was thinking I don't want to be in here. Because after he said he was gay he was like no I'm not staying in here.'

The questionnaire of teachers sought to examine how they perceived the reaction of students to discussions of homosexuality. The comments from teachers in the qualitative questions revealed that the reactions were mixed. Written responses included:

*'Greater proportion – positive
Minority – objected'*

'Varied – some took it seriously, others didn't.'

*'OK on the whole. Pockets of extreme opinion usually religion based.'
'Most were resentful about the acts.'*

Combating homophobic behaviour

The students viewed the activity as positive in terms of reducing the incidents of homophobia in the school and making them question their own behaviour. The students said that in the past they had used homophobic words without really questioning the effect that they could have upon individuals. The students commented:

'Before we had the day when we were talking about homophobia like people in class would say oh you're gay or you're mums gay and now you don't really hear that.'

'What they said was if you say words like that it could affect people in different stages like if you're mental they could actually commit suicide. Some people think before they say things nowadays.'

'The school during the homophobia day made people more open minded about different sex because it shows us that words like we might normally use in class yeah like you're gay or whatever we never kind of looked at it like offensive. Those kinds of things can affect their mental stability.'

The students in the discussion group were especially positive about the diversity training being organised for students in younger age groups. The discussion group sought to explore how the students would view one of their peers 'coming out' at school. The comments made to this question revealed that there was still a long way to go before someone who was gay or lesbian would gain full acceptance in the school. Some of the people when questioned revealed that they would be worried if one of their friends 'came out' about whether other people would view them as gay. Some of the comments included:

'Misinterpretation. People kind of move away from that person cause they'll think that that person will try to come on to them.'

'Might think that that person will try and influence them to go to the same sex. Will isolate that person from that particular group and that particular group will make sure that that person they class as gay wont have any friends.'

'If someone in the school like say for instance came out in our year and said they were a gay or lesbian there would be understanding but I still think like people would back away from them or step back. People might say oh that we've had that day and had that understanding but I think there would still be.'

The questionnaire of teachers sought to gain an understanding of whether the teachers think that homophobia should be discussed in the classroom. All of the teachers who responded said they believed that homophobia should be discussed. The questionnaire sought to gain an understanding of the reason of the reasons behind the answer. The comments from the teachers included:

'Teach students tolerance and respect for all relationships thus reducing discrimination.'

'The taboo makes it an easy target.'

'Homophobia is a type of bullying that needs to be seen by pupils as being wrong.'

References

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