

4.3 Local Secondary Schools

Survey Data

The Local Secondary Schools Survey was distributed to the headteachers of twenty private and state schools. Ten schools responded and the status of these schools is shown in Table 41.

Table 41: The Status of Schools Responding to the Survey

Status	Number
Comprehensive	7
Grant Maintained	1
LEA Special	1
Private	1

Of the ten schools that did not respond, four headteachers gave a reason: two were concerned about the content of the survey, one complained of too much paperwork and one headteacher stated that the school only responded to Local Education Authority surveys.

Nine of the schools were non-denominational and one was a Catholic school. Seven of the schools were co-educational, two were all-boys schools and one was an all-girls school. Eight of these schools had sixth forms and hence an 11-18 age range.

From the survey it emerged that:

- Four headteachers were aware of bisexual, gay and lesbian students in their school while six were not.
- Five headteachers considered their school to be a safe environment for staff to be out as bisexual, gay or lesbian while four did not. Those headteachers that did not consider their school to be a safe environment for staff stated that:

“It would cause problems for both staff and pupils.”

“Prejudice exists among parents, pupils and staff.”

“It would not be okay for pupils to know [about staff].”

“Prejudice and fear prevents staff from coming out.”

- Five headteachers considered their school to be a safe environment for pupils to be out while four did not. Those Headteachers that did not stated that:

“[Bisexual, gay and lesbian] pupils were frequently subjected to verbal bullying.”

“Homophobia among students runs very deep.”

- Four headteachers had dealt with cases of homophobia in their school while six had not. These cases included:

“A pupil [who] was the victim of name-calling and being ignored. This situation was dealt with as a case of bullying by the Head of Year and the Deputy Head.”

“An incident of name-calling which was dealt with through the school’s bullying policy.”

“A case of severe bullying that resulted in the student suffering from physical and other health problems. The student’s GP and Headteacher dealt with this situation but the boy left school unexpectedly.”

- All ten of the schools that responded had an equal opportunities policy, but sexual identity was only included in four schools’ policies.
- All ten schools had a bullying policy, but sexual identity was only included in two schools’ policies.
- When asked what made tackling homophobia within their school difficult, two headteachers responded that:

“The attitude of staff and students [was a problem].”

“There was little acceptance that it’s okay [to be bisexual, gay or lesbian], that staff lacked the confidence [to deal with the issue of sexuality], that there was a lack of awareness and the problem of the ‘macho ethos’ found in school and wider society.”

- All ten schools had a sex education policy and all ten schools included HIV prevention and sexual health promotion in their curricula. All ten schools delivered sex education in personal and social education lessons, seven in biology lessons and one in religious education lessons.
- Seven schools included bisexual, gay and lesbian issues in their sex education curriculum while three did not.
- Five headteachers were aware of Section 28 while five were not. Two headteachers felt that Section 28 affected the work of the school and three felt that Section 28 should be repealed because:

“In whole group teaching situations, it constrains open discussion, although it is less of a problem when in a one-to-one situation with a student who has instigated the issue.”

“Conversations with students can be inhibited and less than honest.”

- Only one school had provided any training for its governors and staff around issues of sexual identity.
- Nine schools provided information about sources of advice and support for young people: seven schools used notice boards to disseminate this information, leaflets were available in six schools and one produced a handbook for students.
- Four schools provided information about local bisexual, gay and lesbian helping organisations: two provided information about the Reading Lesbian and Gay Helpline and two about ReachOUT.
- One school sought external advice and support from local bisexual, gay and lesbian helping organisations on behalf of a student.

Discussion

Trenchard and Warren’s (1984) survey of 416 young gay men and lesbians in London found that 45 per cent had experienced problems at school because of their sexual identity, 58 per cent had been verbally abused and 21 per cent had been physically assaulted. Forty-one per cent of the men had cottaged or cruised and eight young men had been in contact with the police for cottaging, seven for soliciting.

Stonewall conducted a national survey of hate crimes against bisexuals, gays and lesbians in which 4,000 people participated. Thirty-four per cent of men and 24 per cent of women had experienced homophobic violence, 32 per cent had been harassed, 12 per cent had been threatened, six per cent had experienced vandalism, 73 per cent had experienced verbal abuse and four per cent had received hate mail. Nineteen per cent of the sample had been harassed by people unknown to them, eight per cent by colleagues and six per cent by neighbours. Only 37 per cent reported incidents to the police. A lower percentage of those aged under 18 reported incidents to the police (because of the age of consent and fear of prosecution). Of these young people, 48 per cent had experienced violence, 61 per cent had been harassed and 90 per cent had experienced verbal abuse. Fifty per cent of violent assaults involved fellow students and 40 per cent occurred at school, 24 per cent of assaults were perpetrated by fellow students, 44 per cent of harassment was from fellow students and 79 per cent of verbally abuse came from fellow students. The parents and families of these young people were responsible for five per cent of assaults, 14 per cent of harassment and 19 per cent of verbal abuse (Mason and Palmer, 1996).

Nayak and Kehily (1996) found in their study that homophobic practices were regarded by teachers and pupils as natural and routine activities in the developing lives of young gay men (cited in Douglas *et al*, 1997).

A survey of 307 secondary schools in England and Wales by Douglas *et al* (1997) found that 82 per cent of teachers were aware of homophobic verbal bullying and 26 per cent were aware of homophobic physical bullying in their schools. Ninety-nine per cent of these schools had a bullying policy but only six per cent of policies made any reference to young bisexual, gay and lesbian pupils. Ninety-eight per cent of schools had equal opportunity and confidentiality policies but only 25 per cent included young bisexual, gay and lesbian pupils. Sixty-one per cent of teachers were aware of bisexuals, gays and lesbians in their schools and 42 per cent had been approached by these young people for advice and support. In terms of teachers and schools addressing homophobic bullying, the most frequently cited factors felt to hinder efforts were: worries about parental disapproval (22 per cent), lack of experienced staff (15 per cent) and lack of policies (14 per cent).

Rivers' (1998) sample of 140 bisexuals, gays and lesbians found that 82 per cent had experienced name calling at school, 71 per cent had been ridiculed, 60 per cent had been hit or kicked, 58 per cent had been teased, 59 per cent had been the subject of rumours, 49 per cent experienced theft, 52 per cent has been frightened by a look or stare and 40 per cent had attempted suicide.

The Berkshire Anti-Homophobia Group study found that one-third of verbal abuse incidents occurred at school as did one in ten physical abuse incidents, one in ten harassment incidents and five per cent of sexual abuse incidents (Mullen, 1999).

ReachOUT's research project found that:

- Most headteachers were not aware of bisexual, gay and lesbian students in their schools.
- Almost half of headteachers did not consider their schools to be a safe environment for staff or students to be out because of discrimination and homophobia, both from students *and staff*.
- Only four headteachers had dealt with cases of homophobia in their schools, two using the schools' bullying policy. Given the evidence presented in Section 3.1.5 and Section 3.8, these surely represent only the tip of an iceberg.

In terms of policy, all schools had an equal opportunities policy, a bullying policy and a sex education policy. However, only a minority of schools included sexual identity in these policies. Lack of awareness and acceptance, lack of confidence among staff and the macho attitude of some students were all cited as factors making difficult the tackling of homophobia in schools. There is also the question of quality, consider the evidence about the quality of sex education as judged by young people (see 3.1.12).

Half of the headteachers had heard of Section 28 and knew what it was. A minority felt that it constrained the ability and confidence of teachers to adequately deal with bisexual, gay and lesbian issues and they felt it ought to be repealed.

Only one school had provided its governors and teachers with specific training around bisexual, gay and lesbian issues. Most schools provided their students with

information about issues and helping organisations, but only a minority included information about bisexual, gay and lesbian helping organisations.

In terms of local schools addressing bisexual, gay and lesbian issues and needs there is a mixed picture. Some schools are addressing bisexual, gay and lesbian issues and needs as expressed through policy, practice and training while others are not. There is no clear private/state school divide on these issues; neither sector is more progressed or progressive on these issues. The mixed picture reflects the fact that the local education authority (first Berkshire, now Reading) has not provided any assistance or guidance on these issues and central government has only recently begun to issue circulars on these matters (see page 54). This means that the matter has been left to individual governors, headteachers or teachers to address. The result is patchy provision; provision that is not standardised in terms of quality.

Bisexual, gay and lesbian young people cannot assume that they will receive the appropriate education, safe environment, access to information or an environment conducive to personal development and growth that others take for granted and which they should be able to expect. Being bisexual, gay or lesbian (out or not), or questioning their sexual identity, may effect academic achievement, the development of friendship networks, access to peer support, personal safety, mental health (confidence and self-esteem, feelings of suicide, etc. – as discussed in previous chapters) and personal development and growth in negative ways. Given that for most young people school is a full-time occupation, and given that school life is often formative, its importance to bisexual, gay and lesbian young people's lives is clear.