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A whole-school approach to tackling homophobic bullying and ingrained attitudes: Stoke Newington School and Sixth Form

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Brief description

Stoke Newington has a curriculum which meets the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students (LGBT) and extends all students' understanding of diversity. Training for all staff, their commitment to equality and diversity and their approach to poor behaviour have successfully tackled homophobic language, attitudes and bullying.

Overview – the provider's message

'We began our LGBT history month initiative back in 2005 as a response to students' widespread use of homophobic language in and out of the classroom. As the new Head of Year 7, I was able to create a culture of acceptance and understanding with the new cohort. From small beginnings of an introductory assembly, staff from the Year 7 team taught subject-specific LGBT lessons. They organised a student performance of 'Small town boy' in a school assembly. The project grew into a whole-school, community and national event each February'.



Elly Barnes, Head of Year 7

The good practice in detail

A serious problem

Senior leaders and staff report that prior to 2005, homophobic language in the school was rife and many students had anti-gay attitudes. Intimidation and harassment were also issues. Three teachers, all heterosexual, told inspectors about their experiences. One described how he felt intimidated by Year 11 students standing outside his room and following him down corridors shouting homophobic language. Another explained how when he introduced a Year 10 assembly which mentioned the words 'lesbian', 'gay' and 'bisexual' some students shouted out homophobic language throughout the assembly. A third teacher told how every time she walked down the corridor she heard students using terms such as 'batty man', 'queer', 'gay' and 'poof' to each other and did not feel that this was being tackled.

Getting started

The starting point was securing the commitment from senior leaders to tackling the problem. In 2005, the diversity leader started working with Year 7 on a programme of tackling homophobic language and bullying. She introduced, through the curriculum, links in lessons to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and diversity issues. The decision was taken to tackle the problem thoroughly over five years, starting with each cohort as they joined and continuing as they moved through the school. First, she trained all teaching and non-teaching staff to ensure that everyone knew what to do to tackle homophobic language. Not all the teachers were supportive. Three refused to take part and tried to undermine this drive for improvement, citing reasons such as 'being gay is unnatural', and 'being gay is a

‘Instead of a few ‘brave’ people tackling homophobia, we all do.’

lifestyle choice’. Students also responded in various ways, not all of which were positive. A few even walked out of the assemblies when the subject of lesbian, gay and bisexual people was raised. Nevertheless, the diversity leader, backed by senior colleagues and supported by the overwhelming majority of staff, persisted. Throughout this period the determination to tackle prejudice-based bullying was paramount. Most teachers responded well to the tackling of homophobic language. As one commented: Instead of a few ‘brave’ people challenging homophobia, we all do. This empowers us to challenge other forms of discrimination’.

Extending the curriculum

Key to the school’s success was ensuring that LGBT issues were covered in the curriculum. In this way, senior leaders felt it would not be a one-off event or a sticking plaster on the problem. Inclusion and the eradication of prejudice would be rooted within the school’s systems, procedures and curriculum. The diversity coordinator led training for all teachers and heads of department to change the curriculum to take account of sexuality and gender identity. In addition, the curriculum was enhanced by diversity weeks and days to celebrate students’ differences and to ensure that each subject met the needs of LGB students and those who may be transgender. This approach has been highly successful. In art, for example, students evaluate the work of Grayson Perry; in information and communication technology (ICT) students study the life and impact of Alan Turing; in history when studying the holocaust, students look at the impact on other groups such as Travellers and LGB people; and in design and technology, students created LGBT badges and symbols which could be sold to raise money for good causes.



Students reacted very positively. One commented: 'It wasn't like it was something forced but just a normal part of our school day', and another said, 'I liked how we learn things about LGBT people'. One teacher reflected: 'All schools can reap the benefits of an enlightened environment by following the LGBT history month model'. The curriculum for sex and relationships education is very strong because it ensures that each group of students is catered for including LGB and transgender students and it has a strong emphasis on how to be safe'.

Using external role models



To support its work, the school brought in external role models. These were carefully selected to meet identified needs and were often targeted at particular groups of students. For example, a group of Black Caribbean heritage girls were identified as being homophobic in their attitudes and frequently using homophobic language. The school arranged for a Black lesbian rap artist to perform to the whole school but then to work with this group of students. As a result, their attitudes, behaviour and language changed to be more respectful and

understanding of LGB people. Similarly the school arranged a visit from a gay Muslim group to come to speak to the school and to become mentors to Muslim students. As a result, students who are or may be LGBT have rising attendance and achievement. The process of bringing in role models and of curriculum coverage has resulted in students' strong awareness of how different groups have and still contribute to society. One student commented: 'Gay people are just like everyone else, anyone could be gay'.

Involving the wider community

Another key element of the success in tackling homophobic bullying has been the involvement of stakeholders and the community. Parents and carers were kept informed throughout the initiative via newsletters and posts on the very informative website, and their views were sought through questionnaires and forums. No parent or carer objected or complained and most were highly supportive. One commented, 'I know that lots of the parents feel extremely fortunate to have children attending a school that promotes inclusion so skillfully and where children are able to feel confident and proud about who they are'. Another said, 'The project is a very important lifeline for young people as well as a great educational tool within the borough'. The school held celebratory events and [performances](#).



Paralympian Claire Harvey presents at the 2011 LGBT History Month Concert



The London Gay Men's Chorus perform at the 2011 LGBT History Month Concert

After one of the shows, a parent said, 'Attending LGBT evening at the school moved me deeply. I am so pleased my children go to a school with such principles and a real commitment to valuing everybody for who they are'. Summing up the views of many, a parent commented, 'As a parent with two children at Stoke Newington School, I am proud that the school excels not just in the quality of teaching

and the academic curriculum but in teaching the children to be responsible, caring and capable citizens’.

Governors were informed and involved. The Chair of Governors was fully supportive of the initiative and recognised that it was a part of their role under the Equality Act, 2010. As a result of the school’s work, one governor commented, ‘The school’s inspiring work on LGBT issues is one thing that unites the governors in support, and makes us very proud to be associated with the school’. Another said, ‘Stoke Newington School has been at the forefront of underlining the importance of social cohesion through its pioneering and inspiring work eradicating all forms of bullying including homophobia and racism among the school community’.

The school involved the press in publicising positive stories about the initiatives and its impact in reducing prejudice-based bullying. The police were also involved. Before the initiative, the police had received frequent complaints from the public in the park adjacent to the school about students’ behaviour and homophobic language and taunts. The police officer linked to the school told inspectors that complaints of this nature related to students at the school have reduced to nil, in contrast to neighbouring parts of the borough. He was highly complimentary about the impact of the initiative in the community.

Another simple but highly effective action was to enhance the behaviour referral forms to include reference to homophobic language. This meant that all staff would look out for, record and report issues as they arose. Where necessary, this also meant that the police could take the forms and see whether action needed to be taken. This joint work with the police was highly effective.

The school is outward looking and outward thinking. It takes a strong lead on this issue with other schools in the borough, its feeder schools, Hackney Learning trust, the local church, government departments and national agencies. Teachers write lesson plans which cover LGBT issues which are then collated by the diversity coordinators and put on to the [website](#) for teachers across the world to use.



Student attend the the Hackney and Tower Hamlets LGBT History Month

The school’s practice has been commended and rewarded by a number of national and local bodies and agencies. It provides professional development opportunities for other teachers, support staff, local authorities and teacher training providers. In the Diversity Training Centre, Elly trains teachers and supports staff nationally in how to make their own schools LGBT friendly through a programme she devised called [Educate and Celebrate](#), which was featured in the *Independent*. Previous delegates evaluated the training as, ‘highly interactive, full of interesting debate.’ This sentiment was echoed by another delegate who commended the programme because it provided, ‘far more practical resources than I expected’.

The outcome of the school’s work

A significant outcome of the school’s work has been the confidence of LGBT staff and students to be themselves and to be honest about their sexuality without fear of reprisals or harassment. There is a LGBT student group and an LGBT staff group. One student observed, ‘I thought we weren’t allowed to talk about these things but now we are; I don’t feel

ashamed anymore'. A teacher agreed and noted, 'We have done so much to challenge people's attitudes, and to have gay students getting up and reading poems about their sexuality is amazing. I wish I had come to a school like this. It would have saved me a whole lot of worry'.

Overall, the school has become a much more cohesive and inclusive community and there has been a significant decrease in most forms of bullying. As one student commented, 'I have stopped using the word 'gay' in the wrong way; instead I will just call my friends stupid!'

‘Everyone is different and that’s alright.’

Although LGBT is a strong focus it does not dominate other forms of bullying such as racism. By focusing on it, students have applied their thinking to many other groups within society. As one student summed up, 'Everyone is different and that's alright'. The benefits have also been noted by staff, one teacher said, 'The atmosphere has been transformed, no longer do I worry about sniggering or snide comments from students and can concentrate purely on their learning'. Another teacher reported, 'The LGBT work done over the last few years has transformed the language and attitudes of children and staff to homophobia in our school. Children using 'gay' as an insult is extremely rare, and is stopped by self or peer condemnation'.

Provider background

[Stoke Newington School and Sixth Form College](#) is a larger than average-sized high school in the centre of London. It has specialist status for media, arts, science, mathematics and inclusion. There is a wide range of ethnicities and faiths in the school. About one third of students do not speak English as their first language and around 50 students are refugees and asylum seekers. The proportion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is slightly above average and the proportion of students with a statement of special educational needs is almost double the national average. An above average proportion of students are known to be eligible for free school meals. The school achieved an overall effectiveness grade of good in its previous [inspection](#) and its work on diversity, particularly lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender issues, have been recognised locally and nationally.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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