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Tackling homophobic bullying to ensure lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) students feel safe: Prince Henry's Grammar School Specialist Language College

URN: 137704

Area: Leeds

Date published: 9 February 2012

Reference: 120107

Brief description

'Some people are gay, get over it' was the title of a highly successful Stonewall campaign adopted by Prince Henry's Grammar School Specialist Language College to tackle homophobic bullying and ensure that lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) students felt safe and the curriculum met their needs.

Overview – the provider's message

'If we really want to establish an ethos in which **all** our students feel secure and able to be themselves, we can't just address those aspects of equality which seem "safe" to tackle, or those which **we** think are important. We have to find out from our young people what the issues in our school are and then establish very clearly that, when it comes to prejudice, you simply can't pick and choose what you challenge and what you tolerate.'

Janet Sheriff, Headteacher

The good practice in detail

Background

In 2010, the school decided to include a renewed focus on equality issues in the School Improvement Plan, building on achievements as a specialist language college in celebrating cultural diversity and global citizenship. 'Little did we realise at the time that homophobia would become our main focus for the year, or that our students would subsequently take a lead role in disseminating our anti-homophobia work to other schools', says Janet Sheriff.

'Nor, at first, did all staff believe that it would possible to all but eradicate the negative use of words like "gay" in classrooms and around school. However, by looking at sexuality as part of our wider focus on equality, it has been easy for our students to see the parallels with other forms of discrimination and to start to peel away the prejudices: if they agree that racism is wrong and comments about people with disabilities are unacceptable, then why should it be ok to treat someone differently because of their sexuality?'

Students were asked about homophobia in school and they identified this as an issue which gave the leadership team a mandate to tackle the problem head on. Janet says: 'We set out a whole-school strategy, underpinned by a commitment from the senior leadership team. What really makes a difference is what goes on in the classroom day in, day out, lesson by lesson. It's about the classroom-based work which positively portrays LGB athletes, authors, musicians, artists. It's about our displays, our whole-school stance on homophobic language. It's about mainstreaming the existence and "normality" of gay people in the eyes of our students. Most of all, it's about creating an ethos where young people grow up with the confidence to be themselves, but with the clear understanding that everyone else also has the right to do likewise.'

Starting with students' experiences and views

The views of students are important to the school. Student-led forums, such as the global justice group and the fair trade team, enable students to gain perspectives of different equality and diversity issues. In 2010 the [student diversity forum](#) was established as a means of consulting students about equality and diversity issues. Students in the forum identified a list of priorities, the first of which was to tackle inappropriate homophobic language which they felt was in common usage. They designed and distributed



[questionnaires](#) and analysed the results. These identified that although 31% of students agreed there were 'rarely' any homophobic comments or name calling, 41%

disagreed and 28% strongly disagreed. This confirmed the students' original view – that this was an issue that needed attention.

Involving parents and carers from the outset

Parents and carers were invited into the school to discuss equality and diversity issues to complete a questionnaire. The school talked through the students' findings about homophobic language and used this as a discussion point with parents and carers who supported and contributed to the action plan to tackle homophobia. The consultation meeting was followed by newsletters and briefings on the school's website. This ensured that parents and carers were involved in the campaign and was effective in enlisting their support.

Training and supporting staff

The staff diversity steering group was created with the aim of engaging a cross-section of staff in reviewing and promoting issues of equality and diversity. All staff introduced and then reinforced 'zero tolerance' of homophobic language. This consisted of identifying and recording all incidents that they heard which initially caused an increase in recorded incidents. Staff investigated each incident and discussed the issues with the student to ensure that there was no repeat of the incident and that their attitudes were changed. All

staff, including support staff and senior leaders, were trained in how to identify, record, report and tackle homophobia. The training was informed by external specialist resources, such as those produced by [Stonewall](#). Leaders established a system to ensure that staff who were new to the school and initial teacher training students were inducted and trained in how to tackle and report different types of prejudice-based bullying including racism and homophobia.

Communicating the message to students

Staff work together to give a consistent message to students. The behaviour codes are applied without fail and are well known to everyone. Strong systems are in place for students to report bullying and harassment, including a confidential and anonymous reporting system and a secure text messaging system. Students know that there are designated staff they can approach who will deal with all worries and concerns in confidence. This makes students feel safe and secure and listened to. Their concerns are always taken seriously. Senior leaders and teachers use a proactive approach to tackling behaviour issues that ensures that the causes of bullying and prejudice are tackled, rather than just reacted to when they arise. As a consequence of these actions, staff and students are extremely accepting of each other. The school environment is one in which students support each other and feel confident in being themselves knowing they are valued for their differences.

As part of the campaign against homophobia, staff discussed with students that heterosexual people do not need to 'come out as straight', raising the question as to why LGBT people are expected to 'come out as gay' rather than just being themselves. This emphasis, in addition to the open, tolerant, safe and inclusive environment in the school means students and staff feel confident and safe enough to be themselves and to be 'out' in school if they wish. The 'prom couple' recently voted for by the students was a same-sex couple.

Changing the curriculum

Another key to the success of the strategy was to amend and enhance the curriculum to teach openly about LGBT issues. Through the school's specialist language college status, students gain a thorough understanding of different countries and people in the world. International school days and the global emphasis breeds tolerance in students of differences in people around the world. The school has gained level 3 of the Stephen Lawrence [Education Standard](#). Students' understanding of the full range of equality and diversity issues has been a factor in improving students' achievement and knowledge.



In 2010, a [diversity festival](#) looked at three strands of diversity in particular: disability, faith and sexuality. Among other activities, students learnt sign language, learnt about Hinduism in workshops, and learnt about the damages homophobia can cause. As a part of the festival, all staff engaged in Stonewall's '[Some people are gay, get over it](#)' campaign. Staff took turns over the week to wear t-shirts with an anti-homophobia slogan, posters were placed in every room and around the school, and workshops were introduced aimed at eradicating homophobia by indicating to students the damage it causes. Positive reports in the

local media celebrated the school's attempts to promote different strands of diversity.

The curriculum was also enhanced to ensure that students across the school had more frequent opportunities to learn about LGB issues. In Year 9, students watched a visiting theatre production 'Boxed In' which tackled issues around homophobia. Year 10 students watched the Stonewall DVD produced for secondary schools 'FIT' and a representative of Pride Games came to the school to lead sports activities for a day and to discuss stereotyping and prejudice-based language. Role models were invited into school to discuss homophobia. Sir Ian McKellen spent half a day speaking to staff, students and governors and provided an insight into homophobia, the damage it causes and how it hinders achievement. The English department has introduced texts which allude to sexuality and the sixth form completed a project on 'new queer cinema'.



The impact

Key to the success of the strategy to reduce homophobic language was the outstanding vision, drive, passion and commitment of senior leaders to create a harmonious school community in which differences are valued and students show high levels of tolerance for others. Other key factors were the involvement and commitment of all staff and governors. A year later, after implementing a very well constructed action plan and strategy, students were surveyed again and the results indicated a significant decrease in the use of homophobic language.

Provider background

Prince Henry's Grammar School Specialist Language College is a comprehensive secondary school which converted to an academy on 1 December 2011. It was founded in 1607 and its students mainly come from the town of Otley, but with a significant minority from other districts of Leeds and surrounding rural areas. It has increased in size in recent years and is larger than average. Most students are White British with small minorities from Indian and other Asian, Caribbean, African, Chinese, or mixed cultural heritages. There is a below average percentage of students with learning difficulties or disabilities and an average percentage of students with a statement of special education needs.

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