

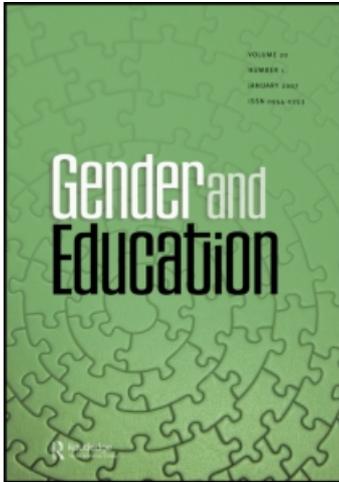
This article was downloaded by: [McCormack, Orla][University of Limerick]

On: 4 February 2010

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 915039237]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Gender and Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713422725>

Attitudes of parents of young men towards the inclusion of sexual orientation and homophobia on the Irish post-primary curriculum

Orla McCormack ^a; Jim Gleeson ^a

^a Department of Education and Professional Studies, Faculty of Education and Health Sciences, University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland

First published on: 04 February 2010

To cite this Article McCormack, Orla and Gleeson, Jim(2010) 'Attitudes of parents of young men towards the inclusion of sexual orientation and homophobia on the Irish post-primary curriculum', Gender and Education,, First published on: 04 February 2010 (iFirst)

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/09540250903474608

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09540250903474608>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Attitudes of parents of young men towards the inclusion of sexual orientation and homophobia on the Irish post-primary curriculum

Orla McCormack* and Jim Gleeson

Department of Education and Professional Studies, Faculty of Education and Health Sciences, University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland

The ‘Exploring Masculinities’ (EM) programme was piloted in 22 Irish single-sex boys’ post-primary schools during the late 1990s. Following objections from some influential journalists and an organisation representing parents whose sons attended Catholic secondary schools, the Minister for Education and Science put the planned dissemination of the programme on hold. The concerns of the objectors included the proposed treatment of sexual orientation and homophobia in the context of the school curriculum. The authors researched the views of a national sample of the parents of young men regarding the inclusion of social and personal education issues on the school curriculum. The vast majority of parents would welcome the inclusion of all EM topics including sexual orientation and homophobia, the focus of the current paper, on the school curriculum. However, parents did express concerns in relation to the adequacy of teacher development for dealing with such sensitive topics and possible conflict between school and parental values.

Keywords: parents; young men; sexual orientation; homophobia; masculinities; schools

Introduction

The ‘Exploring Masculinities’ (EM) programme was developed and piloted by the Gender Equality Unit (GEU) of the Irish Department of Education and Science (DES) in 22 single-sex boys’ post-primary schools during 1996–1999. Immediately after the pilot and prior to dissemination, the programme was the subject of an unexpected amount of media attention that was largely negative in nature. Much of this opposition came from one particular parents’ organisation as well as two high-profile journalists and AMEN, a voluntary group that provides a support service and information for male victims of domestic abuse. In response to this pressure the Minister for Education and Science referred the programme for review to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA).

In view of these negative reactions the GEU commissioned the study of parental views towards the inclusion of ‘EM’ topics such as domestic violence, suicide, depression as well as sexual orientation and homophobia on the school curriculum. The latter two issues are the particular focus of the current paper, which begins with an outline of the background to EM and the subsequent media debate. It then outlines some relevant literature and research regarding masculinities, sexuality and the

*Corresponding author: Email: orla.mccormack@ul.ie

school. Given that ‘curriculum is contextually shaped’ (Cornbleth 1990, 6), some relevant aspects of Irish post-primary schooling are examined, followed by a description of the research methodology and discussion of the main findings.

The Exploring Masculinities programme

There has been an increasing focus on masculinities over the last two decades as reflected in the growth of international research in the area (e.g. Connell 1995; Epstein and Johnson 1998; Gilbert and Gilbert 1998; Lynch and Lodge 2002; Mac an Ghaill 1994; Martino 2005; Renold 2004; Salisbury and Jackson 1996), so that ‘the untraversed frontier has become gold rush territory’ (Newton 1998, 574).

Within the Irish context, up to the late 1990s the focus was on equality for young women, as pointed out by Lynch and Lodge (2002, 92) with a number of related initiatives developed for use in post-primary schools in the context of the 1985 EC Resolution on *Equal Opportunities for Boys and Girls in Education*. These included the FUTURES¹ and Balance: Who Cares? programmes, which aimed, *inter alia*, to challenge sex stereotyping in career choices.

By comparison, gender issues of relevance to males received little attention prior to the development of the EM programme. This programme, developed for use with young men at senior cycle (age 15–18 approximately), addressed issues such as communication skills, power, violence, relationships, mental health, sexual orientation and homophobia and its aims were to:

- Explore different perceptions and experiences of masculinity.
- Promote understanding and respect for diversity.
- Promote healthy lifestyles.
- Promote equality among and between the sexes.
- Provide opportunities for young men to develop enhanced interpersonal and social skills.
- Explore concepts of masculinity that encourages a positive and meaningful understanding of male roles (DES 2000, vi).

While the independent evaluation report (Gleeson, Conboy, and Walsh 2004) was broadly positive, the proposed dissemination, as noted earlier, provoked an unprecedented amount of largely negative media attention, for example:

Design of boys programme intrinsically flawed. (O’Brien 2000)

Let young men tackle growing pains on their own. (Byrne 2000)

Big Mac feminism on the education menu. (Waters 2000)

The report commissioned by the Minister for Education and Science (Mac an Ghaill, Hanafin, and Conway 2004) noted that some parents had been among the most vocal critics of EM, particularly members of the Congress of Catholic School Parents Associations (CSPA), the parent body for Catholic secondary schools. Their concerns included the failure to consult officially the parent bodies regarding the development and implementation of the programme, a point also noted in the independent

evaluation report (Gleeson, Conboy, and Walsh 2004), and the perceived detrimental effects on the family. Some parents were critical of what they saw as an overemphasis on homosexuality on the grounds that only two pages in the programme resource book were devoted to heterosexuality while 10 dealt with homosexuality. Others felt that the programme did not portray marriage as the norm, while others argued that ‘many parents would find the assertion that masculinity is a “social construct” is difficult to accept’ (CSPA n.d., 3). The Association demanded the withdrawal of EM because it ‘undermined young boys by asking them to disclose their feelings about private and personal matters in the classroom; offered group therapy and overemphasised homosexuality’ (Mac an Ghail, Hanafin, and Conway 2004, 123). This is effectively what has happened insofar as the result of the hiatus caused by the Minister’s intervention is that very few schools have provided the EM programme over recent years (Gleeson and McCormack 2006).

Masculinities, sexuality and the school

Masculinity takes multiple forms and ‘at any given time, one form of masculinity [may be] culturally exalted’ (Connell 1995, 77). These hegemonic forms set the benchmark for what it means to be a ‘real man’. Understandings of hegemonic masculinity are ever changing and must be constantly renegotiated and re-enacted (Salisbury and Jackson 1996). According to Connell (1995, 76), masculinity is ‘not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is, rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable’. New groups may challenge hegemony and construct an alternative version therefore it is never complete and consists of ‘ebbs and flow’ (Connell 1995, 77). In modern Western society (Kenway and Fitzclarence 2007) hegemonic forms of masculinity tend to be based on physical strength, emotional neutrality, assertiveness, competitiveness, and rationality (Gilbert and Gilbert 1998). Recently, Connell’s (1995) theory of hegemony has been subject to debate, for example Paechter (2006), Warin (2006) and Francis (2008).

However, very few men can live up to the high standards set by these forms of hegemonic masculinity and many fail to conform. As a result such forms are not only oppressive and destructive to others (such as women and other ‘weaker’ men), but also to men themselves. Having to live up to the ‘ideals’ of manhood can often pressurise boys into acting in specific ways and can affect the way they talk, dress and interact with others:

Masculinity can be looked on as a badly fitting coat. You bought the coat because there were no better coats on the rack or you thought you would be laughed at in an unusual coat. So you adjust your posture until the coat fits. After some time you come to think it really fits, while you are really just hobbling about. (Woltring 1995, 45)

In this context, other forms of masculinity are repressed and many boys respond by distancing themselves from all things feminine (Martino 1999), often resulting in homophobia becoming an integral part of heterosexual masculinities.

Strict adherence to the traditional male gender role can be linked to strong homophobic tendencies resulting in fear or avoidance of homosexual men. This means that young men may ‘develop negative attitudes towards homosexuality as a core dimension to achieving a masculine identity’ (Nayak and Kehily 1997, 5). Boys who

are perceived as weaker, smaller or feminine are likely to be subjected to homophobic bullying. Young men do not necessarily have to be homosexual to be labelled as such and those who do not conform to hegemonic forms of masculinities are likely to be subjected to ridicule and bullying by their peers (Renold 2004).

Schools, frequently referred to as ‘masculinity-making devices’, are one of the most influential institutions in the formation of masculine identities, with Epstein and Johnson (1998, 108) describing schools as ‘important sites for the production and regulation of sexual identities’. Salisbury and Jackson (1996) suggest that schools are institutions where masculinities are negotiated, controlled and renegotiated, and contribute to the formation of hegemonic forms of masculinity while aiding in the subordination of other forms. Those who adhere to gender stereotypes in these competitive arenas are rewarded (Connell 1989). The culture and structures of schools can strengthen and encourage unequal power relations (Capper 1999) while ‘studies have shown that the daily worlds of our schools teach scripts for what is considered to be appropriate gender behaviour during adolescence and later on into adulthood’ (Norman 2004, 4).

The topic of homosexuality tends to be ignored in schools and ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (see, for example, Epstein and Johnson 1998; Renold 2000) is taken as the norm. This results in the situation identified by Lynch and Lodge (2002, 102–17) that gay and lesbian students are the most invisible people in Irish education. Insofar as homosexuality is discussed, this takes place within a heterosexual context where it is seen as an illness rather than a way of life (Ellis and High 2004) and heterosexuality ‘is encoded in language, in institutional practices and the encounters of everyday life’ (Epstein and Johnson 1994, 198). Numerous studies (Barnes 2007; Blumenfeld 2000; Epstein 1997; Hatton and Swinson 1994; Minton et al. 2008; Norman 2004; Rivers 1995; Telljohan and Price 1993) have revealed high levels of homophobic bullying in schools, occasionally originating from teachers. Norman (2004) found that 79% of teachers were aware of instances of homophobic bullying in their school, often on a continuous basis. Hatton and Swinson (1994, 285) found that 25% of lesbian and gay students leave school because of harassment and there is evidence (e.g. Bagley and Tremblay 2000; D’Augelli, Herchberger, and Pilkington 2001) that gay and lesbian students are among the high risk for suicides. According to Blumenfeld (2000) gay and lesbian teenagers are four times more likely to be threatened with a weapon at school with such bullying resulting in loss of confidence, reduced self-esteem, declining academic achievement and early school leaving (Norman 2004). A study of the experiences of homophobic bullying of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) young people in Ireland (Minton et al. 2008) found that over half of the respondents had experienced bullying in the past three months. Such levels of homophobic bullying can result in ‘schools [being] unhappy, painful places for ... boys who do not conform ... who have to struggle against the macho behaviour of significant numbers of boys’ (Epstein 1997, 113).

Some relevant aspects of the Irish education system

For the purposes of the current paper three contextual issues relating to Irish post-primary education are discussed here: the role of the churches in Irish education, the dominance of single-sex schooling, and a reluctance to involve parents officially in their children’s schooling.

The main churches have exercised strong control over education in post-Independent Ireland and successive governments did not 'challenge the Church's teachings' (O'Donoghue 1999, 45). The Catholic Church viewed 'control of schooling as its prerogative' (Coolahan 1981, 72) as shown by Ó Buachalla (1988), Fuller (2002) and reflected in the Council of Education's (1954–60) assertion that the main role of Irish education was the 'the inculcation of religious ideals and values' (Coolahan 1981, 80).

Irish post-primary schooling prioritised knowledge and information transfer ahead of the development of feelings and emotions (Hannan et al. 1983, 33), while critical debate and questioning were stifled (Gleeson 2004; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 1991). Moral education was provided under the umbrella of Religious Education, where syllabi and appointments were controlled by the relevant religious authorities. For example, the Catholic Church feared that the introduction of health education programmes would encroach on 'important moral questions on which the Catholic Church has definite teaching' (O'Donoghue 1999, 50). There was a reluctance to challenge church authorities on moral and sexual education and the introduction in 1991 of the Stay Safe programme to reduce vulnerability to child abuse and bullying became 'the first real challenge by the state to the veto which the Catholic Church exercised over sexual and moral education' (Inglis 1998, 53). More recently, the DES has introduced a number of school-based social and personal programmes, including Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) and Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE).

Reflecting traditional Catholic thinking, there is a strong tradition of single-sex schooling in Ireland. In 2002 some 38% of Irish post-primary students were attending single-sex schools and one-third of all post-primary schools were privately owned and single sex (DES 2003). While single-sex schooling is gradually on the decline, some 16% of boys attended single-sex post-primary schools in 1999–2000 when EM was being developed. The focus of these schools is on 'peer regulation and sporting prowess' (Lynch and Lodge 2002) and academic achievement in a relatively narrow range of subjects while music, home economics, and social and personal development programmes are less likely to be provided (Looney and Morgan 2001).

The Irish Constitution recognises the home and the family as the primary and natural educators of children and guarantees to respect the rights of parents to provide 'for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children' (Constitution of Ireland 1937, Article 42.1). This recognition is reflected in the Education White Paper (DES 1995) and the Education Act (Government of Ireland 1998), both of which acknowledged the important role played by parents in their children's education. In saying this, however, the Irish National Parents Council was not established until 1985 and the OECD (1997) commented that Ireland lagged well behind other developed countries in making formal provision for parental involvement in education, with the result that Irish 'families traditionally played little part in their children's formal schooling' (OECD 1997, 143) and education was left to the experts.

Methodology

In the context outlined above the researchers set out to determine the views and attitudes of parents/guardians of young men towards the inclusion of EM topics including sexual orientation and homophobia, on the senior cycle curriculum. The first phase of

data collection involved the distribution of a customised survey to the parents/guardians of male students in Transition Year² and fifth year (aged between 15 and 17 approximately) in a representative national sample of 120 single-sex and co-educational schools. The researcher visited each school, asking the young men to bring the survey home to their parents/guardians for completion. Of the 9678 surveys distributed, 1915 were completed, giving a response rate of approximately 20%.

Seventy-seven per cent of survey respondents were female, 23% were male and the majority were aged between 40 and 49. While the vast majority of respondents (99%) were the mothers/fathers of the students who brought the survey home, a small number of guardians also responded (both parents *and* guardians are referred to hereafter as either parents or mothers/fathers). The vast majority (93%) of respondents classified themselves as Roman Catholic.

The second phase of the study involved 24 telephone interviews with a randomly selected group of carefully stratified survey respondents that included parents who had completed their education at various stages and equal representation from the co-educational and single-sex school sectors. Given the strong feelings generated by EM, this sample was equally divided between those who had expressed different views on the substantive issues in the survey, i.e. agreed/disagreed with the inclusion of certain topics on the school curriculum. It included equal numbers of mothers and fathers. These interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and lasted approximately 20–30 minutes.

Main findings

The findings of the GEU funded study (Gleeson and McCormack 2006) addressed all topics included in EM. This paper deals with parents' attitudes towards the inclusion of sexual orientation and homophobia on the school curriculum.

*Sexual orientation*³

Asked to rate the importance of heterosexuality as a characteristic of a 'real man', almost 60% of parents indicated that in their own opinion heterosexuality was an important characteristic in a 'real man' while the remainder disagreed. Fathers were more likely than mothers to regard heterosexuality as important in a 'real man'. The importance placed on heterosexuality increased with the age of the parent, with 21% of 30–39-year-olds believing it to be very important compared to 33% of 50–59-year-olds and 36% of 60+.⁴

By way of comparison, almost 90% of parents believed that young men regarded heterosexuality as an important characteristic in a 'real man' with three out of every four believing that young men viewed it as very important. The results can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Importance of heterosexuality in a 'real man' (%).

	Very important	Important	Not important
Parents' own views	24	34	42
Young men's views as seen by parents	74	15	11

Asked whether they believed young men felt under pressure to be heterosexual, 70% of parents agreed that this was the case. Some typical comments included:

Sexuality is of extreme importance for boys; the fear of being homosexual is a serious worry, both for themselves and how they are perceived by their pals. (mother)

Heroes on television and video games are always strong and heterosexual. (mother)

Some felt that such pressure is handed down from elders, e.g. 'we are a country with a strong tradition of this and it is expected by older generations' (mother). One mother commented that 'my son's father wouldn't be very tolerant of homosexuals and this has rubbed off on him. I think my influence has diminished, as he has become a man. He thinks it's just not macho to be gay'.

Some parents felt that young men's fears of being labelled homosexual were linked with their poor communication skills on the grounds that young men who are open and honest about their feelings are easier targets for homophobic bullying. They suggested that in this context young men keep their feelings, emotions and concerns to themselves. The comments of two mothers were particularly illuminating: e.g. 'it is more difficult for boys to express their feelings and emotions without being seen as less masculine' and 'it is vital for the well being of our young men that they are able to form relationships where talking about personal issues with friends/mentors is seen as healthy not "gay" or "soft"'.

School curriculum

The majority of parents were in favour of the inclusion of sexual orientation (82% agreement) and homophobia (90% agreement) on the school curriculum with mothers slightly more positive than fathers in both cases, while 75% indicated that they would trust their sons' teachers to deal with these issues in confidence and with sensitivity. Some typical comments included:

Not to discuss the above issues is to create a narrow-minded homophobic society. (father)

[Schools should] stop young men from thinking that any person who is different or sensitive has to be gay. (father)

Three main lines of argument emerged in favour of the inclusion of these topics on the school curriculum. Firstly, a number of parents welcomed the inclusion of such topics because of the frequency of bullying and personal 'put-downs' relating to sexuality in schools, with children as young as 10 'calling each other such derogatory terms as gay and lesbian ... it now appears to be the greatest insult to call one another a girl, woman or gay' (mother). Some parents believed that 'young men would prefer any label other than homosexual' (mother) while others indicated that young men 'do not include homosexuals in their circle of friends' (father). One father told the story of his son who 'is a sensitive soul was labelled gay by one of the other students'.

Secondly, some parents believed that schools are currently not doing enough to examine and challenge such issues. For example:

My son's bullying could have been avoided if the predominance towards macho-ism was challenged. (father)

Principals are not dealing with the verbal put-downs that exist each day in schools. (mother)

Boys calling each other names especially gay was somewhat accepted in my son's school. The school did very little to help and my second son is beginning to have to put up with the same treatment all because they are involved in music, drama and can speak about feelings. (mother)

The education in Ireland's single-sex schools remains by and large filled with homophobia, sexual remarks, and personal put-downs. (mother)

Thirdly, those parents who did not feel comfortable discussing such issues with their sons in the home welcomed support from the school. For example, one mother explained how it was 'nearly impossible' to discuss such issues with her son: 'we were never taught how to talk about these things or how to talk to them. We are awkward about these topics ourselves'. In relation to discussing social and personal issues with their sons at home, a small number of male interviewees suggested that the relationship between young men and their fathers could never be as close and open as that between young women and their mothers. One father explained how:

We had three girls after my son. My wife would talk far easier to the girls about things than I would to my son about things. We don't discuss personal matters at all. I think it is harder for men to talk to each other. I know if I go in to my son's room to talk we would probably end up wrestling rather than talking. You seem to show more aggression rather than sitting around a table talking.

Other parents reported that they did not experience difficulties conversing with their sons on such issues with one father indicating that 'we always talked about things like sexual orientation. They are just talked about in a different way now than 10 years ago'. Others provided practical advice on how they address such issues with their sons, with one father indicating that 'the practical way to talk to them is to go off for a drive. At 60 miles per hour they can't exactly jump out of the car!'

There was also a feeling that the school might help parents understand the issues addressed in social and personal programmes and help them develop the skills necessary to communicate with their sons on such issues, for example 'schools could arrange sessions for parents at the same time that the boys are having sessions in school. In this way communication could be opened up at home. Maybe joint sessions could eventually take place if people had got to that stage of being comfortable with this' (mother).

Parental concerns

While the vast majority of respondents were supportive of the inclusion of sexual orientation and homophobia on the school curriculum, some of them voiced concerns. The inclusion of 12 parents from the Disagree category among those who were interviewed allowed the researchers to probe such concerns further. Four main concerns emerged.

Firstly, parents were concerned that the school may not transmit the attitudes and values taught in the home. For example, one father remarked that he 'would be of the minority view and what we as a family think wouldn't be a standard issue. I wouldn't want someone else coming along telling me it's one way or the other. They would be

dictating what my moral view is or should be' (father). Others believed that in school you are obliged to take the politically correct view and this may contradict their own beliefs and values. For example:

In schools you are obliged to take the politically correct line on such issues and I don't think that is what a number of parents want. I think tolerance should be taught without an 'anything goes' attitude. Is it ok to pass on to schoolchildren that this is ok sexual practice, just because a lot of people do it? I don't think that is ok. It is the politically correct anything goes view. I think when stuff like sexual orientation gets taught in a school environment it does teach anything goes because they cannot say this is wrong. (mother)

Secondly, some believed that these issues are too sensitive to address in a school environment, e.g. 'school climate would not allow this discussion for fear of ridicule and bullying' (father). Some respondents feared that addressing such topics may be frightening for homosexual young men and 'in a class of 30 students, one or two may be gay. I think they would have more of a chance of being victimised. Others who say that it is their choice and indicate that they have no problem with them being gay, would be more likely to be tarred with the same brush' (father). Another parent advised young men to 'never come out to your peers or in school. It is a proven disaster' (mother).

Thirdly, some respondents believed that young men at the beginning of senior cycle may not be mature enough at this stage of their development to deal with these issues appropriately, with one mother pointing out that 'it depends on the maturity of students. I believe some of them would be able to discuss these issues and some wouldn't'. These parents feared that this immaturity may result in a 'more jokey approach' (mother) to discussion at school and it would make it more difficult to get 'beyond the silly responses' (mother).

Finally, lack of adequate teacher development was one of the main concerns expressed by parents in relation to the school-based social and personal development of young men on sexual orientation and homophobia. Parents believed that 'teachers are not trained to take on this role' (father) as 'they do not study such issues when in college' (mother). Some feared that teachers who teach such classes are merely 'filling in teaching hours' (mother). Some typical comments include:

Some guy who is normally a biology or woodwork teacher been told to go in there and teach SPHE. This person doesn't know how to deal with these issues and may be passing on more error than fact. (mother)

A geography teacher taking a religion class is not qualified to handle such issues. (father)

Others felt that 'in the absence of proper training and support for teachers these topics would be better off not included' (mother) as 'untrained people could do more harm than good' (mother). Concerns were also expressed regarding the absence of specific protocols for teachers to follow, with one father indicating that 'there are no protocols for teachers on how to deal with these issues generally'.

While a number drew attention to the importance of appropriate teacher development issues others noted that it was equally, if not more important, for teachers to have a suitable personality in order to engage adequately with social and personal issues, e.g. 'any teacher who is sensitive, kind, caring, and a good listener. You can have all

the training in the world but you may never be able to deal with these issues adequately' (father).

Discussion

Themes emerging from the current study include the difficulties experienced by some parents in communicating and discussing social and personal issues with their sons; the development of teachers to engage in social and personal education or the teacher's personal disposition for dealing with such issues. For the purposes of the current paper three main issues have been identified for discussion: challenging homophobic bullying, parental attitudes, support and involvement, and teacher development.

Challenging homophobic bullying

Parents were almost unanimous in their belief that young men feel that it is important to be seen as heterosexual, e.g. 'young men do not include homosexuals in their circle of friends'. Parents also believed that levels of homophobic bullying were high in their sons' schools and those presumed to be homosexual, particularly the weak, were being subjected to various forms of bullying. These views are supported by two Irish-based studies: Minton et al. (2008) concluded that over half of the gay, lesbian and bisexual respondents surveyed experienced bullying in the past three months, while Norman (2004) found that the majority of teachers were aware of instances of homophobic bullying in their school.

A number of respondents in the current study suggested that schools are generally reluctant to challenge homophobic behaviour, e.g. 'boys calling each other names, especially "gay", was somewhat accepted in my son's school'. While the inclusion of topics such as sexual orientation and homophobia in social and personal education programmes should encourage schools to examine such issues and challenge such behaviour, the reality may not always match the rhetoric:

Teachers who are maybe not comfortable with it shy away from Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) within Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE). So they can say, 'Yes we're doing SPHE' but they never quite get around to the RSE section. (Morgan, Kitching, and Maycock 2007, 25)

Whilst there is merit in the current tendency to examine such issues within the context of dedicated programmes, e.g. EM, SPHE etc., the reality is that sexual orientation and homophobia are deeply embedded within the culture of society and schools that it is unduly optimistic to hope that individual teachers in individual classrooms will tackle them on their own. If schools are to become effective in challenging homophobic attitudes, they must adopt a 'pervasive', 'whole school' approach, such as that advocated by Gilbert and Gilbert (1998, 240). This is particularly true when one considers that the politics of gender are normally worked out within the 'gaps and crannies' of formal schooling and the 'informal peer group' (Kessler et al. 1985, 40) and not just within the formal structure of classrooms. In practice, it requires close scrutiny of all aspects of school life, including the schools sports fields, playgrounds, changing rooms, classrooms, staffrooms, principals' offices, and approaches to discipline etc.

Furthermore, an examination of such attitudes should begin at primary level due to the fact that, as found in the current study, children as young as 10 are now calling each other 'gay' and 'queer' and using homophobic bullying in the formation of their masculine identity (see also Epstein 1997; Renold 2000, 2002, 2004). It may be too late to challenge homophobic views during senior cycle by which stage homophobic tendencies would be well established. However, the reaction of some parent groups to EM does not bode well for the introduction of such topics in primary schools.

In this context, it is important to acknowledge the influential role of parents in the development of their children's attitudes and values regarding sexuality. Where schools do challenge homophobic views, they must recognise that attitudes and prejudices learned in the home make a very deep impression on children (e.g. Cossman 2004; Cameron et al. 2001). Therefore, if schools are to succeed in challenging such attitudes they must work in close partnership with parents to promote social and personal education and challenge homophobic attitudes. This is particularly important when one considers that the majority of parents in the current study viewed heterosexuality as a vital characteristic in a 'real man'.

Parental attitudes, support and involvement

One of the most important findings in the current study was that parents are overwhelmingly in favour of the inclusion of issues relating to homophobia (90% agreement) and sexual orientation (82% agreement) on the post-primary school curriculum. Respondents advanced a number of reasons why the school should play a role in this regard, including their own feelings of inadequacy in discussing such issues with their sons. While a small but vocal minority of parents objected in principle to the involvement of schools in such issues, most parental concerns related to the adequacy of teacher development, as will be discussed in the next section.

The EM experience illuminates the politics of parental involvement in curriculum matters. While the demise of the programme highlights the power of vocal, articulate, minorities, the umbrella post-primary National Parents Council and some of its constituent bodies have expressed very positive attitudes towards EM (Gleeson and McCormack 2006, 56–9; Mac an Ghaill, Hanafin, and Conway 2004, 158). This dichotomy raises important questions for future Ministers in relation to how they should respond to 'pressure groups' in the context of social and personal education. The current findings suggest that there is an onus on policy-makers to revisit the issues included in the EM programme in view of the overwhelming levels of parental support.

Nor can the legislative framework be ignored. While the Education Act (Government of Ireland 1998) obliges schools to promote the social and personal development of students 'in consultation with their parents' (Part 2 Section 7), the external evaluation of the EM programme (Gleeson, Conboy, and Walsh 2004) found that little or no attempt was made to involve parents in the development or piloting of the programme. While this reflects the tendency of the Irish education system to keep parents at arms length, the current study highlights the need for educationalists to work more closely with parents at national and local levels.

It must also be recognised that the patrons of privately owned schools may put their own particular stamp on programmes that transcend traditional subject boundaries, as reflected in the case of citizenship education (Gleeson 2009). For example,

the Education Act (Government of Ireland 1998, Section 30, 2e) states that the school authorities 'shall not require any student to attend instruction in any subject which is contrary to the conscience of the parent of the student or in the case of a student who has reached the age of 18 years'. Seen in this context, the reluctance of schools to engage more extensively with parents regarding social and personal education matters is somewhat puzzling.

Teacher development

The current study highlights the concerns and fears of parents regarding the need for 'teacher training' in relation to issues such as sexual orientation and homophobia. These concerns have clear implications for pre-service education and for the continuing professional development (CPD) of teachers insofar as new skills and alternative pedagogical approaches are required to address these topics in a sensitive and appropriate manner.

In view of the 'virtual absence' of SPHE from most initial teacher education courses in Ireland (Morgan, Kitching, and Mayock 2007, 136), there have been calls for the inclusion of issues around homophobic bullying in pre-service and in-service teacher training 'as a matter of concern' (Minton et al. 2008, 187). Meanwhile CPD provision in relation to SPHE/RSE has mostly been 'one-off', as reflected in the call of Morgan, Kitching, and Mayock (2007, 44) for 'a balance between out-of-school in-service and in-school support'. Almost half the Irish post-primary teachers who did experience related CPD felt that it did not prepare them to teach the topics effectively (Geary and Mannix McNamara 2003, 28), e.g. 'teachers feel that they are not properly trained to teach/deal with specific areas of course'.

In order to reduce their levels of discomfort when addressing SPHE, teacher development must become a policy priority. This is particularly true in the case of dealing with topics such as sexual orientation and homophobia, which tend to be avoided in schools (Morgan, Kitching, and Mayock 2007; Norman 2004). The neglect of teacher development for social and personal education is not unique to Ireland as reflected in the calls for enhanced provision to develop teachers' ability, knowledge base and confidence in discussing such issues in other jurisdictions (Buston et al. 2002; Milton et al. 2001; Walker, Green, and Tilford 2003; Walker and Milton 2006).

The particular needs of young men, who are labelled 'hard to reach' and whose behaviour has been categorised as 'counterproductive' (Walker 2001, 123), deserve particular attention. Although young men are often slow to engage and participate in relationships and sexuality classes, they can pick up quickly on discomfort and insecurity on the part of teachers and this may account for their 'jokey approach' and 'silly responses' mentioned by respondents in the current study. It is hoped that growth in teacher confidence will lead to increased levels of parental confidence.

From the perspective of school leadership, teacher selection for involvement in personal and social education is also important, as reflected in parents' comments regarding the suitability of the teacher's personality to address sensitive issues. The current practice where principals select teachers at random or where all teachers are given one class of SPHE per week (Geary and Mannix McNamara 2003) is hardly the way to ensure that these teachers are, as one parent called for, 'sensitive, kind, caring [and] good listeners'.

Conclusion

The positive reactions of the majority of respondents in the current study provide a valuable platform for the promotion of the social and personal education of young men in Irish post-primary schools. Parental concerns regarding the professional preparation of teachers for dealing with issues such as sexual orientation and homophobia underline the need for greater attention to the development of relevant and appropriate teaching methodologies throughout the continuum of teacher education. When one considers the perceived prevalence of homophobic bullying within Irish post-primary schools, the challenges for the future appear great. They were well summarised by one participating mother:

Attitudes of boys to homosexuality are still in the dark ages. I am very often shocked with their attitudes to known homosexuality in the school. They are afraid to be associated with their boys – for fear of been labelled. I often think they would prefer any label other than homosexual.

Acknowledgement

This research is based on work supported by funding from the Gender Equality Unit, Department of Education and Science, Dublin.

Notes

1. Originally called 'Girls into Technology'.
2. Transition Year is a voluntary, one-year, enrichment-type, school-based programme that is provided between the Junior Certificate (junior cycle) and Leaving Certificate (senior cycle). It is taken by some 40% of a year cohort.
3. Heterosexuality is regarded as 'normal' and 'natural' within Irish schools while homosexuality tends to be ignored (Lynch and Lodge 2002). The Exploring Masculinities programme, however, included a specific focus on sexual orientation with particular reference to homosexuality.
4. The authors acknowledge that the inclusion of a question regarding the characteristics of a 'real man' may have led parents to respond in terms of the stereotypical characteristics of a 'macho man'. However, while acknowledging this limitation, the authors believe that the findings remain interesting.

References

- Bagley, C., and P. Tremblay. 2000. Elevated rates of suicidal behaviour in gay, lesbian and bisexual youth. *Crisis* 21, no. 3: 111–17.
- Barnes, C. 2007. Boy cultures and the performance of teenage masculinities. PhD thesis, Dublin Institute of Technology.
- Blumenfeld, W.J. 2000. How homophobia hurts everyone. In *Readings for diversity and social justice*, ed. M. Adams, W.J. Blumenfeld, R. Castaneda, H. Hackman, M.L. Peters, and X. Zuniga, 57–66. New York: Routledge.
- Buston, K., D. Wright, G. Hart, and S. Scott. 2002. Implementation of a teacher-delivered sex education programme: Obstacles and facilitating factors. *Health Education Journal* 17, no. 1: 59–72.
- Byrne, D. 2000. Let young men tackle growing pains on their own [Letter to the editor]. *The Irish Examiner*, October 5.
- Cameron, J., J. Alvarez, D. Ruble, and A. Fuligni. 2001. Children's lay theories about ingroups and outgroups: Reconceptualizing research on prejudice. *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 5, no. 2: 118–28.
- Capper, C. 1999. (Homo)sexualities, organisation and administration: Possibilities for in(queer)y. *Educational Researcher* 28, no. 5: 4–11.

- Congress of Catholic School Parents Associations (CSPA). n.d. Review of the Exploring Masculinities programme. Submission made to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.
- Connell, R.W. 1989. Cool guys, swots and wimps: The interplay of masculinities and education. *Oxford Review of Education* 15: 291–304.
- Connell, R.W. 1995. *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Policy Press.
- Constitution of Ireland. 1937. *Bunreacht na hEireann*. Dublin: Stationery Office.
- Coolahan, J. 1981. *Irish education: Its history and structure*. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration.
- Cornbleth, C. 1990. *Curriculum in context*. Basingstoke, UK: Falmer Press.
- Cossmann, J. 2004. Parental heterosexism and children's attitudes towards people with aids. *Sociological Spectrum* 24: 319–39.
- D'Augelli, A.R., S.L. Herchberger, and N.W. Pilkington. 2001. Suicidal patterns and sexual orientation related factors among lesbian, gay and bisexual youth. *Suicide and Life-threatening Behaviour* 31: 250–64.
- Department of Education and Science (DES). 1995. *Charting our education future: White paper on education*. Dublin: Stationery Office.
- Department of Education and Science (DES). 2000. *Exploring masculinities: Programme in personal and social development for transition year and senior cycle boys and young men*. Dublin: European Social Fund/DES.
- Department of Education and Science (DES). 2003. *Statistical report 2002/03*. Dublin: Government of Ireland.
- Ellis, V., and S. High. 2004. Something more to tell you: Gay, lesbian and bisexual young people's experiences of secondary school. *British Educational Research Journal* 30: 213–25.
- Epstein, D. 1997. Boys own stories: Masculinities and sexualities in schools. *Gender and Education* 9: 105–15.
- Epstein, D., and R. Johnson. 1994. On the straight and narrow: The heterosexual presumption, homophobias and schoolings. In *Challenging lesbian and gay inequalities in education*, ed. Debbie Epstein, 197–227. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Epstein, D., and R. Johnson. 1998. *Schooling sexualities*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Francis, B. 2008. Teaching manfully? Exploring gendered subjectivities and power via analysis of men teachers' gender performance. *Gender and Education* 20: 109–22.
- Fuller, L. 2002. *Irish Catholicism since 1950: The undoing of a culture*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.
- Geary, T., and P. Mannix McNamara. 2003. *Implementation of social, personal and health education at junior cycle*. Limerick: University of Limerick.
- Gilbert, R., and P. Gilbert. 1998. *Masculinity goes to school*. London: Routledge.
- Gleeson, J. 2004. The rhetoric of reform and the reality of educational politics; Power and control in Irish post-primary curriculum policymaking and implementation. In *Ideology and curriculum: Irish experiences – international perspectives*, ed. C. Sugrue, 101–40. Dublin: Liffey Press.
- Gleeson, J. 2009. The influence of school and policy contexts on the implementation of CSPE. In *Education for citizenship and diversity*, ed. G. Jeffers and U. O'Connor, 75–95. Dublin: IPA.
- Gleeson, J., P. Conboy, and A. Walsh. 2004. *The piloting of 'exploring masculinities' (1997–1998): Context, implementation and issues arising: Report of external evaluation*. Limerick: University of Limerick.
- Gleeson, J., and O. McCormack. 2006. Report on research funded by the gender Equality Unit. Unpublished report submitted to the Gender Equality Unit of the Department of Education and Science, Ireland.
- Government of Ireland. 1998. *The Education Act 1998*. Dublin: Stationery Office.
- Hannan, D., R. Breen, B. Murray, D. Watson, K. Hardiman, and K. O'Higgins. 1983. *Schooling and sex roles: Sex differences in subject provision and student choice in Irish post-primary schools*. Dublin: ESRI.
- Hatton, E., and S. Swinson. 1994. Sexual orientation, policy and teaching. In *Understanding teaching: Curriculum and the social context of schooling*, ed. E. Hatton, 279–91. Sydney: Harcourt Brace.

- Inglis, T. 1998. *Lessons in Irish sexuality*. Dublin: University College Dublin.
- Kenway, J., and L. Fitzclarence. 2007. Masculinity, violence and schooling: Challenging poisonous pedagogies. *Gender and Education* 19: 117–33.
- Kessler, S., D.J. Ashenden, R.W. Connell, and G.W. Dowsett. 1985. Gender relations in secondary schooling. *Sociology of Education* 58: 34–48.
- Looney, A., and M. Morgan. 2001. A gendered curriculum? An investigation of some aspects of curriculum provision in post primary schools. *Irish Educational Studies* 20: 73–83.
- Lynch, K., and A. Lodge. 2002. *Equality and power in schools: Redistribution, recognition and representation*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Mac an Ghaill, M. 1994. *The making of men: Masculinities, sexuality and schooling*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Mac an Ghaill, M., J. Hanafin, and P. Conway. 2004. *Teachers, materials and the media: A study of Exploring Masculinities in an international context*. Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.
- Martino, W. 1999. Cool boys, party animals, squids and poofers: Interrogating the dynamics and politics of adolescent masculinities in school. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 20: 239–63.
- Martino, W. 2005. Issues in boys' education: Encouraging broader definitions of masculinity in schools. *Curriculum Leadership* 3, no. 33. http://www.curriculum.edu.au/leader/issues_in_boys'_education:_encouraging_broader_def,12017.html?issueID=9796
- Milton, J., L. Berne, J. Peppard, W. Patton, L. Hunt, and S. Wright. 2001. Teaching sexuality education in high schools: What qualities do Australian teachers value? *Sex Education* 1: 175–96.
- Minton, S.J., T. Dahl, A.M. O'Moore, and D. Tuck. 2008. An exploratory survey of the experiences of homophobic bullying among lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered young people in Ireland. *Irish Educational Studies* 27: 177–91.
- Morgan, M., K. Kitching, and P. Mayock. 2007. *RSE in the context of SPHE*. Dublin: Crisis Pregnancy Agency.
- Nayak, A., and M.J. Kehily. 1997. *Masculinity and schooling: Why are young men so homophobic?* London: Cassell.
- Newton, J. 1998. 'White guys'. *Feminist Studies* 24: 572–98.
- Norman, J. 2004. *A survey of teachers on homophobic bullying in Irish second level schools*. Dublin: Dublin City University.
- Ó Buachalla, S. 1988. *Education policy in twentieth century Ireland*. Dublin: Wolfhound.
- O'Brien, B. 2000. Design of boys programme intrinsically flawed. *The Irish Times*, October 14.
- O'Donoghue, T.A. 1999. *The Catholic Church and the secondary education in Ireland 1922–1962*. Paris: Peter Lang.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). 1991. *Ireland*. Paris: OECD.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). 1997. *Parents as partners in schooling*. Paris: OECD.
- Paechter, C. 2006. Masculine femininities/feminine masculinities: Power, identities and gender. *Gender and Education* 18: 253–63.
- Renold, E. 2000. Coming out: Gender, (hetero)sexuality and primary school. *Gender and Education* 12: 309–26.
- Renold, E. 2002. 'Presumed innocence': (Hetero)sexual, homophobic and heterosexist harassment amongst primary school girls and boys. *Childhood* 9: 415–33.
- Renold, E. 2004. 'Other' boys: Negotiating non-hegemonic masculinities in the primary school. *Gender and Education* 16: 247–65.
- Rivers, I. 1995. The victimisation of gay teenagers in schools: Homophobia in education. *Pastoral Care*, March, 35–41.
- Salisbury, J., and D. Jackson. 1996. *Challenging macho values: Practical ways of working with adolescent boys*. London: Falmer Press.
- Telljohan, S.K., and J.H. Price. 1993. A qualitative examination of adolescent homosexuals' life experiences: Ramifications for school personnel. *Journal of Homosexuality* 26, no. 1: 41–56.

- Walker, J.L. 2001. A qualitative study of parents' experiences of providing sex education for their children: The implications for health education. *Health Education Journal* 60: 132–46.
- Walker, J., J. Green, and S. Tilford. 2003. An evaluation of school sex education team training. *Health Education* 103: 320–29.
- Walker, J., and J. Milton. 2006. Teachers' and parents' roles in the sexuality education of primary school children: A comparison of experiences in Leeds, UK and in Sydney, Australia. *Sex Education* 6: 415–28.
- Warin, J. 2006. Heavy-metal Humpty Dumpty: Dissonant masculinities within the context of the nursery. *Gender and Education* 18: 523–37.
- Waters, J. 2000. Big Mac feminism on the education menu. *The Irish Times*, October 24.
- Woltring, L. 1995. 'Dat maak ik zelf wel uit!?' *Werken met jongens; ontwerp voor een seksespecifieke pedagogiek* ['I'll do it my way!?' Working with boys. Design for a sex and gender specific pedagogy]. Coutinho: Bussum.