



School of Education Studies
Dublin City University

*Straight Talk: An Investigation of
Attitudes and Experiences of Homophobic
Bullying in Second-Level Schools*

by
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Executive Summary

- The aim of this research was to explore the attitudes and experiences of students, parents, teachers and school principals regarding homophobic bullying in second-level schools.
- One hundred and twenty five interviews were conducted in five second-level schools in the Greater Dublin Area using a method that reflected a grounded theory approach.
- Five codes or themes were identified using the data collected from the one to one interviews. Three focus groups were also conducted with students, parents and teachers after the interviews were finished to discuss the issues that arose from the initial analysis of the individual interviews.
- The five themes identified were **heteronormativity**, **fear**, **stereotyping**, **pervasive terms**, and **religious influence**. All of these themes were found to contribute to homophobic bullying on the part of students.
- The theme of heteronormativity was strongest in the boys' single-sex voluntary school.
- The theme of stereotyping was strongest in the girls' single-sex voluntary school.
- These themes can be related to narrowly constructed definitions of masculinity among boys, limited personal experiences of people who identify as gay or lesbian among both boys and girls, the influence of the media and the limited provision of sexuality education programmes in all of the schools in which we interviewed students.
- For their part teachers seem to accept that homophobic bullying is a normal part of the interaction of their students and consequently fail to address it unless it gets out of hand or is happening immediately in front of them.
- Many of the teachers and some parents who were interviewed identified the religious ethos of their school as an important factor in whether the school can address issues related to sexuality education or not.

It is recommended that:

- Sexuality education be included as part of pre-service and in-service training for teachers.
- That the Department of Education & Science issues clear guidelines to schools on their responsibility to address homophobic bullying among students and teachers.

- That Boards of Management immediately engage in a process of consultation aimed at producing policies in their schools that incorporate both local school ethos and national equality legislation.
- That the NCCA develop guidelines on how to represent sexual diversity in the various syllabi of the formal curriculum i.e. English, Science, French.
- That further research be conducted to identify best practice from schools that have already begun to develop policies and programmes that include sexuality education and/or address homophobic bullying.

Introduction

This report represents the findings of the second phase of a major research project on homophobic bullying in Irish second-level schools. The project was funded by the Gender Equality Unit of the Department of Education & Science with assistance from the EU Social Fund and the National Development Plan 2000-2006. It followed from the first phase which was a survey of 725 SPHE teachers in second-level schools and in which it was found that homophobic bullying existed in 79% of Irish second-level schools and that 41% of teachers found this type of bullying more difficult to deal with than other forms of bullying (Norman, 2005).

Aim

This research explored the attitudes and experiences of students, parents, teachers and school principals regarding homophobic bullying in second-level schools.

Research Participants

This report will outline the data that arose out of the one hundred and twenty-five individual interviews with students, parents, teachers and school principals between October 2004 and February 2005 in five second-level schools in the greater Dublin area. Having been chosen randomly, the participants were invited to participate in the interviews beforehand either directly by an appointed liaison teacher from their school (mainly the adults) or in writing (letters to parents). Parental consent was obtained for the students to participate in advance. All of the participants were told beforehand that they would be interviewed about bullying in the school and each interview began with a general discussion on bullying. The study employed a strategy that reflected a grounded theory approach.

The five case study schools in this study were randomly chosen from each of the following sectors in Irish second-level schooling;

- Voluntary Secondary (boys),
- Voluntary Secondary (girls),
- Voluntary Secondary (Co-educational),
- Public Sector (i.e. Community/Comprehensive)
- Single-Sex Fee-Paying.

Voluntary Secondary schools are the largest sector (60%) of second-level school in the free education scheme in Ireland. They are privately owned and managed. The trustees of the majority of these schools are religious communities or Boards of Governors. They receive State funding towards the cost of the building and maintenance of the school and the full cost of teachers' salaries. The Public Sector schools make up the remaining 40% of second-level schools in the free education scheme and are administered by (i) Vocational Education Committees while (ii) Community/Comprehensive schools are managed by Boards of Management of differing compositions. These schools receive complete funding towards their running costs and teachers' salaries although the trustees of Community Schools provide 15% of the initial building costs. Fee-Paying schools exist outside the free education scheme in Ireland and are normally under the patronage of a religious community or a Board of Governors but they do receive State funding for teachers' salaries.

Table 1: Schools Participating in the Main Study

School	Status	Interviewees			General Description
School A	Boys' Single-Sex Voluntary School.	Gender	M	F	A Catholic denominational school under the trusteeship of a male religious order. It has approx. 600 students and caters for a lower-middle class clientele
		Students	5	0	
		Teachers	4	1	
		Parents	0	5	
		Principal	5		
Total	14	6			
School B	Girl's Single-Sex Voluntary School	Gender	M	F	A Catholic denominational school under the trusteeship of a female religious order. It has approx. 630 students and cater for a middle class clientele
		Students	0	5	
		Teachers	1	4	
		Parents	0	5	
		Principal	0	5	
Total	1	19			
School C	Co-education Community School	Gender	M	F	As a Community School this school is under the trusteeship of the local VEC and the Archdiocese of Dublin. It has approx. 768 students and caters for a lower-socio-economic class clientele
		Students	2	3	
		Teachers	2	3	
		Parents	0	5	
		Principal	0	5	
Total	4	16			
School D	Co-Educational Voluntary School	Gender	M	F	A Catholic denominational school under the trusteeship of a male religious order. It has about 503 students – lower to middle class clientele
		Students	2	3	
		Teachers	3	2	
		Parents	0	5	
		Principal	0	5	
Total	5	15			
School E	Girls' Single-Sex Fee Paying Voluntary School	Gender	M	F	A Multi-denominational school under the trusteeship of the Anglican Church. It has approx. 618 students some of whom are borders – upper class clientele
		Students	0	5	
		Teachers	2	3	
		Parents	1	4	
		Principal	0	5	
Total	3	17			

The overall gender balance of participants was female to male 2:1. However, there were almost an equal number of female to male teachers interviewed across all of the schools, with a female to male ratio of 3:1 among the school administrators. All of the parents interviewed, except for one, were female which in itself is possibly an indication of parental involvement in schools and of course this will have to be taken into account when analysing the data (Table 1).

The report will begin with a discussion on the main themes that arose out of these interviews and this will then be followed by a comparison of the themes across the five schools.

Emergence of Themes

The amount of rich data gathered from the interviews was reflective of the naturalistic approach taken in conducting this research. A number of themes were identified in the data. These five themes and their subsequent categories and properties are discussed in the remainder of this report.

Theme One: Heteronormativity

Heteronormativity may be defined as the universal presumption of heterosexuality. In other words, it is an underlying value system which presumes that being heterosexual is the only normal way to exist. The theme of heteronormativity in terms of beliefs and attitudes was present in most interviews in all schools. This can especially be seen in how they understood people who were perceived to be different from the norm.

The teachers who worked in these schools highlighted the way in which the students monitored the boundaries of what was considered to be normal and abnormal:

“To be gay is to be different, and difference is treated with suspicion”.
(Teacher 1, Male, School A)

“If you are not gay you don’t want to be called gay. They (the students) would look on it as not normal”.

(Teacher 3, Male, School A).

Parents also showed an awareness of how important it was for young people to appear to be part of the ‘norm’ in school and this was closely connected with the student’s perceptions of what was considered to be appropriate masculine and feminine behaviour:

“Bullying goes on all of the time, anyone who is a bit different will get called names. Especially if they (a boy) are bit of feminine, maybe in their voice... for the students being gay is non-masculine, wimps, the boys don’t want to accept their own feminine side.”
(Parent 3, Female, School A).

“There are different rates of growing up. Some have boyfriends before others do. Children are encouraged to grow up so fast, there is more pressure...and if you are not developing at the same rate as those around you, then you are in trouble because you will not be seen as being part of the norm”.
(Parent 3, Female, School B).

“The ones who get bullied are those who don’t have strong characters, outsiders... those who are different”
(Parent 5, Female, School E).

What the parents have to say here concurs with the findings of previous studies that have linked homophobic behaviour to narrow constructions of masculinity among adolescent boys (Mac an Ghail, 1994; Lynch and Lodge, 1999).

The data from the interviews with the students in the five schools also reveals a strong heteronormative value system particularly in the boys' single-sex school:

“Gay student would probably get a hard time around here. A few people would have problems with it, because it is different, not normal. People are slagged if they're not into football or PE, and because of the music they like. Calling someone a faggot is if they are not like a guy”.

(Student 4, Male 16, School A).

“I took up boxing because I was slagged as being gay, which I am not, but I had to do something to make them see I wasn't”

(Student 3, Male, 17, School C).

“If there were a gay kid in the school then they would get a bad time, coz they are different. We are brought up to dislike things they do, like it is “not normal” to be two guys together. Fellas would take it worse; more girls tend to be open-minded.”

(Student 3, Female, 17, School D).

In interviews, the school principals seemed to say that being bullied about one's sexuality was a consequence of being perceived as being different in a school:

“I am aware of homophobic bullying in this school...it happens even if the boy is vaguely effeminate... they (the students) try to fit in with the norm, they are aware of what people might say if they are seen to be different. I don't think this has changed over the years. There are stereotypical notions among the boys: he is effeminate, studies, doesn't play football, he must be gay, even if this is not the case.”

(Principal, Male, School A).

“There is a fear of being labelled as a Lesbian. Having a relationship or even just being seen to be having a relationship with a boy is very important in a single-sex girl's school. Don't want to be seen as different as this might result in hassle from the other girls.”

(Principal, Female, School E).

Staff as well as students who were perceived to be different from the norm where sexuality is concerned also risked being treated in a negative way by students and other members of staff as this teacher's reaction reveals:

“A female staff member told me that she was gay. I kept telling myself not to react to her in any different way and that she is the same person as she was before I knew about her sexuality.”

(Deputy Principal, Female, School D).

Underlying all of these responses is an understanding that heterosexuality is the only normal way for humans to exist and that homosexuality is a deviation from this norm. The question arises as to whether the school creates this heteronormativity in society or whether society creates it in the school. The traditional argument in sociology is that the school plays a specific role in the socialisation of young people and in the transmission of the dominant culture from society. However, one cannot ignore the fact that schools are societies in themselves and as such they also produce their own cultures which are deeply rooted in a value system.

Theme Two: Fear

A second major theme that arose from the interviews in the five schools was *fear* of all things gay or lesbian. This theme emerged from interview data in all of the schools. It came across as a strong issue among the respondents in School E, the private fee-paying girls' single-sex school. It was less of an issue in School C, the co-educational voluntary secondary school, where there is at least one member of staff who is gay and relatively open about his sexual orientation.

“If there were a gay student in the school, he would be got at. There is a fear about homosexuality and boys are less open minded.”

(Student 4, Female 17, School D).

“it would not bother me if there were gay girls on a one-to-one basis, would prefer not to share a room with one of them. Not too comfortable.”

(Student 4, Female, 16, School E).

Teachers also recognised that their students had a fear of being perceived or recognised as a gay or lesbian and this was seen to impact on classroom management:

“There are ‘off the cuff’ remarks like “don’t touch me”, and if there are benched seating for two people then you hear “go away from me”, “he brushed against me”. They are sure to make noise with the chair as they move away (from the boy/s perceived to be gay). They are afraid that someone might brand them as gay; they want to be seen as macho guys.

(Teacher 2, Female, School A).

“It seems girls are less hostile towards gay boys, might be accepted as an ‘honorary girl’. There is a fear about gay girls...a fear of being labelled as one.”

(Principal, Female, School B).

The interviews also revealed that a large part of the fear among students has to do with a perception that a) a gay/lesbian person will always make a sexual advance on someone of the same sex and b) if this were to happen not knowing how to respond:

“A lot of people would not have an open mind to this type of difference (being gay)...what happens if they are attracted to me.”

(Student 2, Female, 17, School B).

“boys are paranoid that they are being eyed-up...in case a gay makes a move on them”

(Student 2, Female, 16, School C).

“I would be wary of a gay girl like in case she makes a move on you”.

(Student 5, Female, 16, School D).

“It is like we are women and unused to that (lesbians), I would be more uncomfortable towards lesbians because they might be attracted to me; it would change things with a friend (if found out friend was gay).”

(Student 3, Female, 16, School E)

A related aspect was the fear of parents for their own son or daughter if they were to identify themselves as gay or lesbian. For the most part the parents stated that they

would accept their son or daughter's sexuality. Their fears had to do rather with how other students, and society generally would react to them:

"I would prefer if my son was not gay when he grows up. There is still a stigma about it, he would definitely be slagged in school, get into fights and be thumped around."

(Parent 2, School A).

"I wouldn't mind if my daughter was gay. But I would feel that life would be harder for her, I would have questions about how can she make her way through life."

(Parent 2, School B).

"If my son told me that he was gay, I would hope that he would be safe and well. I know of one gay boy in the school and I know it was hard for him. I would be worried for my own son if got the same treatment. I would be worried about other people's reaction to him..."

(Parent 1, School C).

"If my child were gay I would have a few tears but wouldn't turn my back on them of course, would love them anyway. There would be a bit of sadness and tears because of what the outside world might think."

(Parent 2, School D)

"If I found out that my daughter was gay I would be very disappointed for her, because I know life would not treat her easily."

(Parent 5, School E).

Several of the parents explained that they would be in favour of homosexuality being included to some degree as part of their son/daughter's education in school as this might mean that there would be less discrimination against gay and lesbian people.

The data from some of the interviews also seemed to show that there was less fear and greater acceptance of gay males by female students:

"People at school are more comfortable with the idea of gay guys. It is more publicised, there are gay men who are celebrities."

(Student 3, Female, 17, School E)

and that lesbians might have an easier time in school because they would be less obvious than gay males:

“I know a gay woman...gay girls are not as obvious (as gay boys), and girls can come through school being less obvious”.

(Parent 1, Female, School A)

“A gay boy is more obvious in the school...it is not as obvious for girls (lesbians) and so they probably get an easier time.”

(Student 2, Male, 16, School D)

Overall, the staff and parents in all schools agreed that the fear expressed by the students had to do with a lack of education and personal experience of people who were gay or lesbian.

Theme Three: Stereotyping

As far as their knowledge of gay and lesbian people was concerned the data from the interviews revealed that many of the students, parents, teachers and school administrators who took part in this study were operating out of limited notions of what it meant to gay or and often these notions were based on media characterisations:

“There are gay people on television and there is a certain level of acceptance; it is not like before, it would not be that bad”

(Teacher 1, Male, School A).

“Gay guys are seen as cool; they are not a threat (to girls), it is like having a guy who knows about being a girl. Girls cannot understand a gay woman, they are not as understanding of them, and most of the girls seen as lesbian on TV are sad not cool.”

(Parent 2, Female, School B).

Underpinning a lot of the knowledge that has been constructed by the female students is the view that men who are gay are more feminine and fun to be with than those who are heterosexual:

“I have a gay friend, a guy, he is great to go shopping with. Also gay males have a perspective and can help you with boyfriend problems.”
(Student 5, Female 17, School B).

“I think a gay male is more in touch with himself, gay males seem funny and they are honest (about their feelings) with you”
(Student 2, Female 18, School C).

“Girls would like a gay fella because he would be more into fashion and shopping and how he looks.”
(Student1, Male, 16, School D).

“A gay guy is fun to go shopping with. They seem to be nice”
(Student 1, Female 17, School E)

However, the general consensus seemed to be that gay females would be more “butch”, and less popular especially among females:

“Gay women are not attractive”
(Student 1, Male, 15, School A).

“I think you would know if a girl was gay because she would not be into girls stuff, I would feel uncomfortable around one”
(Student 4, Female, 17, School B).

“I don’t understand lesbians, they pay little attention to personal hygiene, the butch ones don’t really pass... get left alone by straight males and females”
(Student 6, Male, 17, School C).

“Only last Friday I heard my daughter and her friends talking about a girl in their school...slagging, they said she was a lesbian...this is because she is well built and strong, butch, you know”.
(Parent 3, School E)

For the most part very few of the interview participants had any personal contact with someone who identified as gay or lesbian and consequently their knowledge and understanding was confined to a limited set of stereotypes, perhaps revealing how little real knowledge they had regarding gay and lesbian people in everyday life.

Theme Four: Pervasive Terms

All of the students who participated in the study described the use of terms such as 'faggot', 'queer', 'gay' or 'dyke' by students to insult each other as pervasive behaviour. In other words these terms were part of the everyday parlance in their schools:

“Regardless of their sexuality boys are slagged for being gay as an insult. They use words like fag, queer... If younger boys hear the gay terms used they repeat them, often with no idea of what they mean.”

(Teacher 1, Male, School A).

“There is name calling...when we use the gay word it is really only messing, suppose if you were really gay it might affect you on a gay level...I would have heard someone being called gay four or five times already today.”

(Student 5, Male 16, School A).

“I have heard rumours about one of the teachers, they call her a lesbian, although it is possibly more the fact that they don't like her, they want to say something bad about her.”

(Student 4, Female, 17, School B).

“Gay' as a term is used a lot. It is a common word. Faggot, queer not meant because you are gay but because you are a twat.”

(Student 6, Male, 17, School C).

“Gay terms are used casually, If you say something stupid that is gay!”

(Student 3, Female, 17, School D).

“When you say something like 'stop being so gay' it is like 'stop being a spa'. Like if you go to a teacher then you would be like a spa.”

(Student 5, Female, 17, School E).

For the most part the young people in this study minimised the use of homophobic words as 'just messing' and said that they were words used to 'slag' not to hurt others:

“You might call someone a fag but it would be only joking with each other, don't meant it.”

(Student 1, Male, 15, School A).

“If you are friendly with someone then it is messing, if you aren’t friends with them then maybe it’s bullying.”

(Student 1, Male, 18, School C).

“You can get slagging from your friends, they will say you are a minger, loser or a dyke, but it is only joking”

(Student 4, Female, 16, School E).

The pervasiveness of homophobic words as terms of abuse within the schools studied raises questions about how teachers and parents react to this use of language by students. The data from this study suggests that many teachers and parents accept these terms as normal behaviour among adolescents and that teachers opt to let this behaviour go unless it happens in a very overt manner:

“If we hear terms used we would ask them to stop slagging, but it (gay etc) is so much part of the vernacular now; sometimes you have to turn a deaf ear.”

(Teacher 1, Male, School A).

“Bear in mind the use of language around words like ‘gay’, it is an everyday term, everything they don’t approve of is ‘gay’, it is negative, it what they use to describe something as negative.”

(Teacher 2, Female, School B)

“In relation to staff this teacher says that comments that are made may not be confronted enough. He had brought attention to homophobic bullying in terms and dealt with it in class, other teachers might not.”

(Teacher 2, Male, School C).

“If it is happening right in front of me, I would stop it, if in the distance I wouldn’t bother, it is just too frequent. It is a term I am not as opposed to as others, it is just a term that would be picked up on.”

(Teacher 3, Female, School D).

“Have heard students pass comments but this is just a normal thing.”

(Teacher 1, Male, School E).

Whether homophobic bullying and name calling has become pervasive in schools because teachers do not address it when it occurs or whether teachers do not address it because it would not be practical due to its pervasiveness, is not clear. Overall the

teachers I met in these schools seemed to be anxious about a perceived disapproval by colleagues, parents, boards of management and even students if they were to strongly address homophobic bullying in their schools. Alison Jones (2003) argues that unlike fear, anxiety is understood to have a quality of indefiniteness. She says, “*anxiety lies in the terrible anticipation of something which we cannot quite explain or understand fully*”. Consequently, in the silence around this issue from school authorities, it could be argued that the teachers have developed an anxiety about a possible reaction to them working against homophobic name calling in the same way as they would be proactive in addressing racism. In other words, it is the power of silence that ultimately controls how teachers and students alike react to this issue.

Theme Five: Religious Influence

The issue of religion and employment of gay and lesbian teachers arose in all of the schools that had Catholic trustees. The Catholic Church has very specific teachings on homosexuality describing it as a tendency towards “an intrinsic evil” and “morally disordered” (Ratzinger, 1986: 3). Staff either said that they would have to be careful because of the Catholic ethos of the school or they went to great lengths to explain that their school had a liberal Catholic ethos and would be accepting of gay and lesbian people. Others again explained that as long as the teachers kept their sexuality private and were discreet then there would not be a problem:

“There is talk among the male teachers that there is one gay teacher but I don’t think so. The macho men on the staff say quietly that he is gay. I don’t know but if he was openly gay I would say it would be a problem from the top down, as we have a Catholic ethos in this school.”

(Teacher 2, Male, School A).

“Wouldn’t think that parents would object if there was a gay staff member, there might be concerns if their values were transmitted but no

more than a teacher who was in (names political party), but you never know. The Catholic ethos here is very caring and Christian in its true sense. They don't do down people at all."

(Teacher 5, Male, School B).

"There is a religious ethos to this school, it is possibly more covert than overt, and I think it should be more overt. I think no matter what respect for each individual is crucial, for themselves and for others. In a Catholic school you would have to talk about what the teaching of the Church is on homosexuality, it depends on how it is done and approached. Personally I don't think we should make judgements on anyone. Should give information from all sides and let them make up their own minds."

(Teacher 1, Female, School C).

Some of the teachers identified the subjects that they teach as having a bearing on whether or not it mattered if they were gay or lesbian:

"I wouldn't say that our school ethos would have a problem with homosexuality, there isn't really a heavy Catholic presence in the Board of Management, although there are teachers who are gay and they have to be careful because of the subjects they teach."

(Teacher 1, Male, School D)

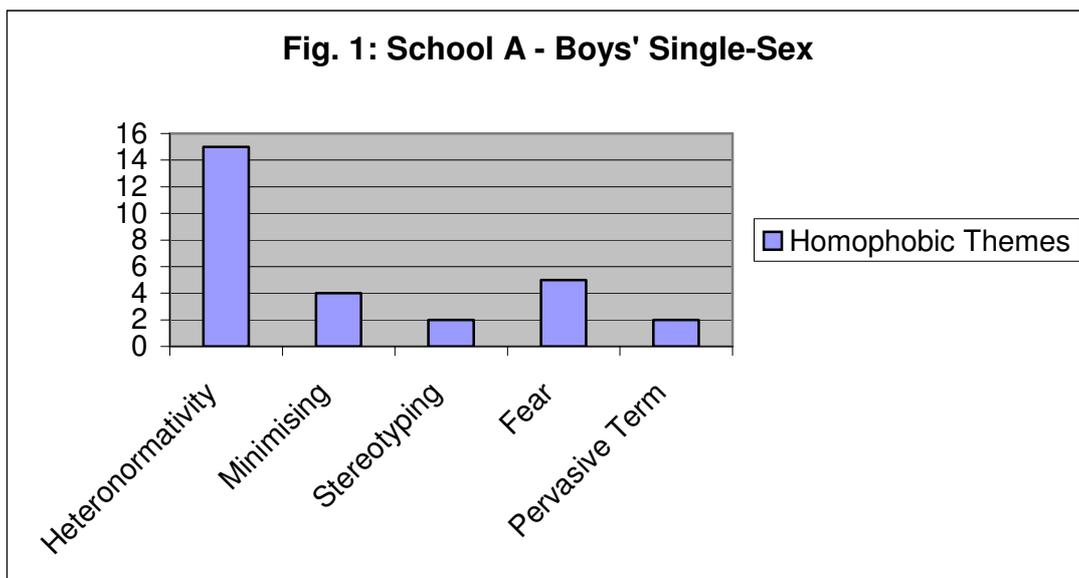
The reason for this has to do with the rationale of the Religious Education syllabus that is used in most Irish schools in that it is catechetical and denominational in nature. In other words, a teacher of Religious Education is expected by the Church and the school to uphold all of their teachings and to be a faith role model for the students. If a teacher of Religious Education identified himself or herself as gay or lesbian publicly this might call into question their commitment to the Church's teachings and jeopardise their job.

It is clear from what these teachers said that the Catholic Church is recognised as an authority figure in their schools and that they feel obliged to be seen to uphold Church teaching where homosexuality is concerned. What the teachers had to say

also suggests that school management has adopted a *don't ask, don't tell* attitude to this issue.

Comparison across Schools

Five main themes emerged from the interview data. The occurrence of each theme in each of the five schools is illustrated in figures 1-6 below. The examination of the frequency of the occurrence of each theme in each school reveals some interesting findings.¹



¹ The scale on these figures represents the number of occurrences of each theme in each school as they have coded and categorised from the interview data.

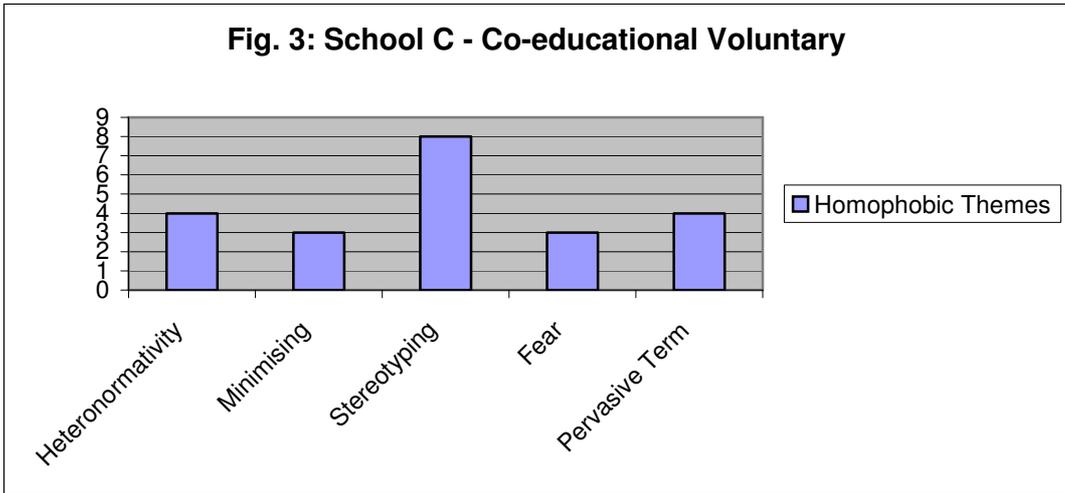
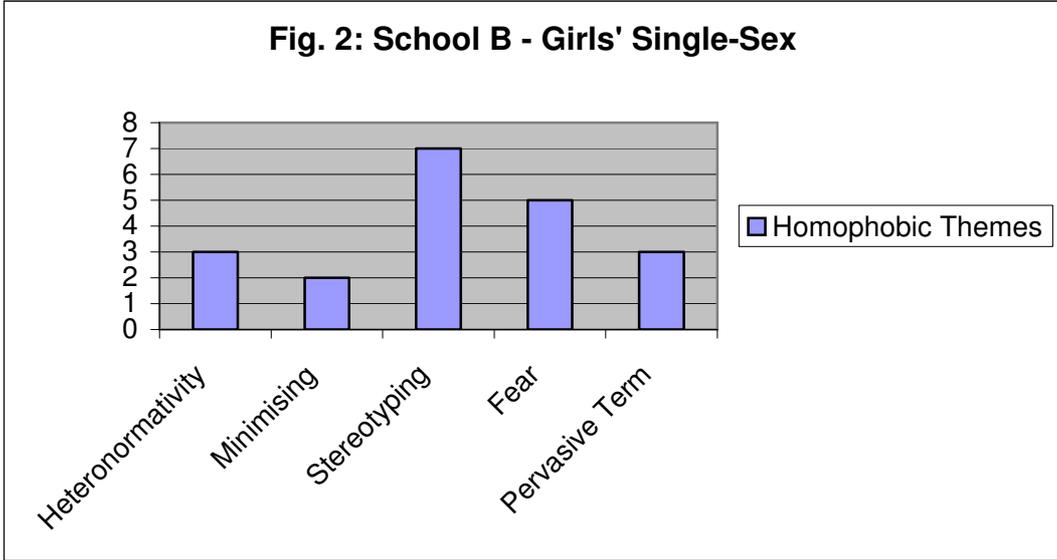


Fig. 4: School D - Co-educational Community

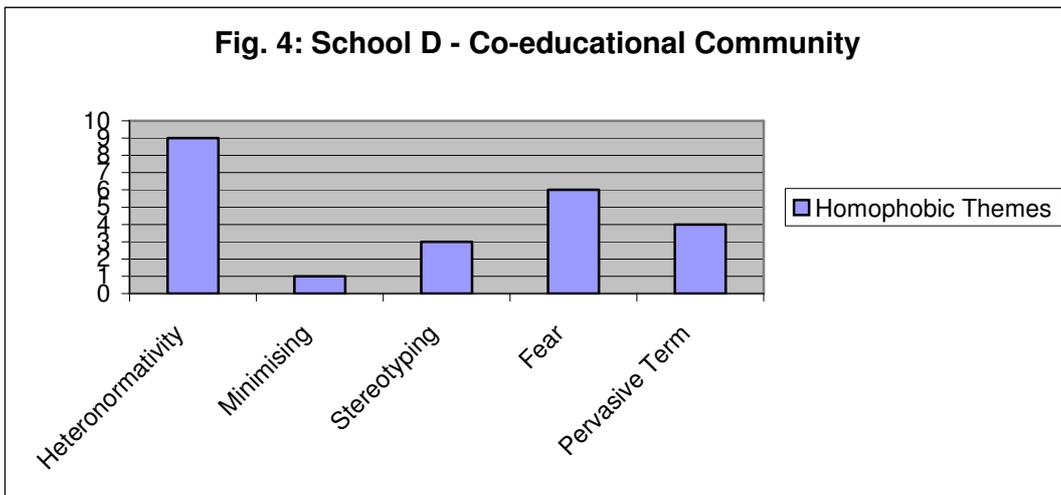


Fig. 5: School E - Girls' Single-Sex Fee Paying

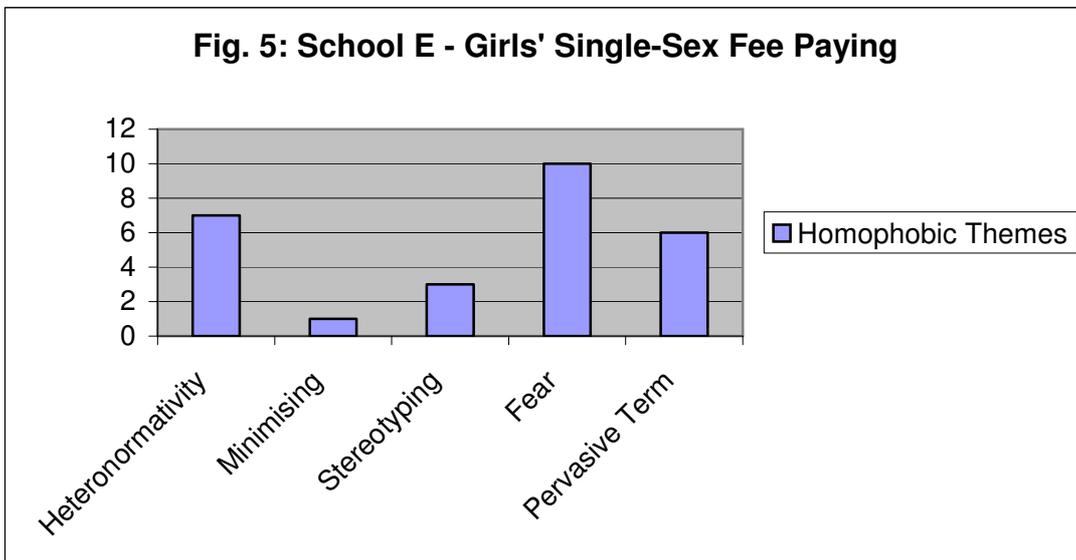
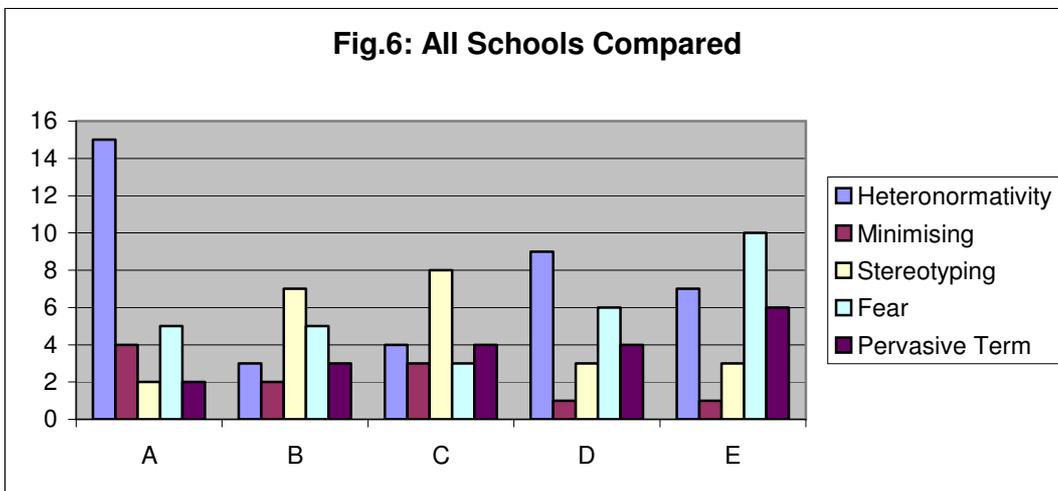


Fig.6: All Schools Compared



The theme of heteronormativity was strongest in School A, the boys' single-sex school voluntary school (Figure 1). This is not surprising as previous research has shown that adolescent boys' schools tend to operate out of narrowly constructed definitions of masculinity characterised by the value they place on physical strength, body size and sporting prowess (Lynch, 1999) and this has been related to high levels of homophobic bullying (Norman, 2005). The theme of heteronormativity was also found to be strongly present among the participants in School D, the co-educational community school (Figure 4) in which boys made up the majority of the student population.

The participants, particularly the female students, in School B the girls' single-sex school (Figure 2) and School C the co-educational voluntary school (Figure 3) seemed to be most likely to hold stereotypical views of gay and lesbian people. It was quite clear that the girls in School B and School C had very limited personal experience of real people who identified as gay or lesbian and that the main source of their information about gay and lesbian people was through a number popular television programmes in which gay and lesbian people are portrayed in a comical and stereotypical manner. The stereotypical views expressed by the female students in School B and School C influenced their attitude towards gay and lesbian people. Gay men were much more acceptable to them than lesbian women as gay men were perceived to be good friends, fashion conscious and able to express their feelings, while lesbians were perceived as overly masculine and unattractive. This confirms the findings of previous studies that have found that stereotypes about social reference groups are highly prevalent among adolescents (Brown, 1989; Youniss et al, 1994;

Macrae et al, 1996). Furthermore, adolescents are also known to be influenced by these stereotypes in their decision making (Koslowski and Okagaki, 1986).

The related theme of fear was also found to be most prevalent among the students in School E, which was the girls' single-sex private fee-paying school (Figure 5). Here we found that the use of homophobic terms were quite prevalent among the girls and that there was a fear of getting close to someone who was lesbian.

Discussion

In the data from the interviews in the five Dublin schools the themes of heteronormativity and homophobia were found to be active partners in the modern Irish educational experience in second-level schools. It appears that the views of the students in particular were strongly rooted in a view of the world where *normal* people are perceived as heterosexual and that those who identify themselves as gay or lesbian are seen as being abnormal. The reaction of these young people to those who are perceived as not heterosexual was one of derision characterised by name-calling, physical revulsion and isolation. Through this type of reaction young people in second-level schools could be described as being involved in policing the boundaries of sexuality for their school and for the wider society. This can be seen even in the way the young people used words such as 'gay' 'fag' and 'queer' to slag their peers who were not gay or lesbian, thus ensuring that anyone who might be thinking about breaking away from the heterosexual norm will think twice before doing so.

The negative attitudes of the students towards people who identified themselves as gay or lesbian were further compounded by any lack of formal education or role

models where homosexuality was concerned. Few of the pupils had ever participated in classes where homosexuality was discussed as part of their Social Personal and Health Education programme. In the absence of any formal education on this topic, the students were left to construct their own ideas about gay and lesbian life and for the most part these constructions were informed by stereotypical characterisations from the media and their peer group, which could be said to have further compounded their prejudice against gay and lesbian people. Many of the young people interviewed identified 'being different' as the cause of being called names or bullied in a homophobic way. This would seem to indicate that these young people in second-level schools have a poor tolerance for diversity and this is not surprising when we consider the *apparent* homogeneity of their school culture.

For the most part, teachers in these schools seemed to take it for granted that young people would behave in a homophobic manner towards each other in school. The pervasiveness of homophobic name-calling seemed to be almost out of control with teachers turning a deaf ear to it, unless behaviour got too out of hand among the students. As social actors charged with the education of young people the teachers were found to make a very strong statement about the validity of homophobic behaviour through their silence and lack of action against it. Furthermore, teachers in most of the schools were aware of the Catholic Church's teachings against homosexual relationships as a valid way of life and they seemed to negotiate the tension between being seen to maintain the ethos of the school and their own personal opinions by maintaining a very strong separation between their private and public lives and this seemed to be acceptable to school principles. Although not always explicit, it was clear that through the Religious Education syllabus and through its

role as Patron or Trustee of schools, that the Catholic Church's teachings are still very influential in terms of what is taught in Irish second-level schools where relationships and sexuality are concerned. Consequently, the Church can be identified as a significant contributor to heteronormative and homophobic attitudes in schools.

Young people are influenced as much by their home-life as they are by the culture of their school. Most of the parents interviewed expressed disappointment or sadness if they found out that their son or daughter was gay or lesbian. In all cases they explained that this was because they believed that life was harder for those who identified as gay or lesbian particularly in school. Many of the parents did say that they would like schools to include more education about sexual orientation as part of the formal curriculum as this would go some way to addressing discrimination and homophobia. The majority of the parents who took part in the interviews were female and so the views of male parents are under represented in the data. However, several of the female parents did say that they believed their husbands would have a harder time accepting a son who was gay. This seems to reflect a belief that their husbands have constructed a particular form of masculinity which they expect their sons to adhere to and this, coupled with female parents sadness at having a gay or lesbian child, may be a source of much of the heteronormative views held by students in schools. In this context, even for a heterosexual boy or girl, to be called or identified as being gay or lesbian is nothing less than to be a social pariah.

Only one student and one teacher, both in School C, the co-educational voluntary secondary school, identified as being gay during the interviews. Consequently, it is not possible for us to generalise too much about the experiences of homophobia for a

gay or lesbian in a school based on just what these two participants had to say. However, they revealed a picture of school life made up of an endless network of relationships that have to be continually negotiated by the person who identified themselves as gay or lesbian. Furthermore, several students, parents, teachers and school principals said that they believed a student who identified as gay or lesbian in school would have a very difficult time. This confirms what other studies have found (GLEN/Nexus, 1995) in Ireland and explains why so many gay and lesbian people, students and teachers, remain silent about their sexuality while in school.

Recommendations

- That pre-service and in-service training be given to teachers so that they can become confident in providing educational programmes aimed at promoting acceptance of sexual diversity among students.
- That the Department of Education & Science issues clear guidelines to schools on their responsibility to address homophobic bullying among students and teachers.
- That Boards of Management immediately engage in a process of consultation aimed at producing policies in their schools that incorporate both the local school ethos and national equality legislation.
- That the NCCA develop guidelines on how to represent sexual diversity in the various syllabi of the formal curriculum i.e. English, Science, French.
- That further research be conducted to identify best practice from schools that have already begun to develop policies and programmes that include sexuality education and/or address homophobic bullying.

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