

Exploring the Experiences of LGBT+ Secondary School Students in South-East Ireland

Realisation of ‘difference’ and the impact on experiences in education and beyond

Introduction

Over the past 20 years the number of second-level students identifying as LGBT+ has increased substantially. Guidelines published by the Department of Education (DoE) in conjunction with the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN) were intended to assist schools in safeguarding everyone in educational organisations to support LGBT+ students. However, many LGBT+ students in Ireland have a negative experience of school, do not reach their full potential, have low self-esteem, and often are early school leavers (Mayock et al., 2009; Higgins et al., 2016).

A recent study by the present authors (forthcoming) examined eight people’s experiences of being LGBT+ in a secondary school environment. All were students between 1991 and 2014, were aged 24–42, had varying sexual orientations, and had studied under different patronages in the south-east of Ireland.

Fieldwork consisted of interviews 45–75 minutes long, and the transcripts were returned to participants for member checking. Eight pen pictures offer particularly vivid written summaries that elucidate the participants’ secondary school experiences. The entire data set was also analysed using inductive coding and the constant comparative method. Five recurring themes emerged:

- » LGBT+ realisation and its impact
- » experiences of extracurricular activities
- » teacher and peer relationships
- » school attitude towards LGBT+ issues and perceived attitudes today
- » opinions on policy/procedural best practice in second-level schools.



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LGBT+ students often experience secondary education in a very different way, despite recent advances and the current debates on equality, diversity, and inclusion. This study examined former second-level LGBT+ students’ experiences with their realisation of ‘difference’ and the impacts on their educational experiences, extracurricular activities, and peer and teacher relationships, during and after their school years.

Discussion

Various factors (personal, psychosocial, and environmental) appear to have a fundamental influence on LGBT+ students' second-level school experiences. Many participants reported that their realisation of 'difference' increased their tendencies towards introversion, and they adopted strategies of 'flying under the radar' in school in order to simply get through the day; a similar strategy is reported by Payne and Smith (2014).

BelongTo (2020) found that victimisation is an ongoing issue in secondary schools, with 73% of LGBT+ students saying they felt unsafe there. Our findings indicate a high level of verbal and physical bullying during class and also during extracurricular activities. Verbal and relational bullying was most prevalent, followed by physical bullying.

In the LGBTIreland Report, study participants (aged 14–25) who experienced LGBTI bullying in school 'had significantly higher scores on the depression, anxiety, stress, and alcohol use scales . . . and significantly lower self-esteem' (Higgins et al., 2016, p.24). The consequences of homophobic bullying experienced by participants in our study were social isolation, depression, self-consciousness, shyness, and disruption of their personal and social development. Some said they still feel the effect of being LGBT+ in school into their adulthood.

While the participants in our study were secondary students between 1991 and 2014, our findings raise questions about what current LGBT+ secondary-school students are being subjected to and highlight the impact that these experiences may have on their education and life contexts now and in the future.

Teacher and school attitudes evidenced a lack of educator and student understanding and awareness. Many participants felt they did not receive the same positive experiences of education as their heterosexual counterparts. The feeling of intimidation restricted LGBT+ students from positively accessing the school curriculum, both in the classroom and with extracurricular opportunities.

Participants in our study identified that interactions between members of the school community determine a person's quality of learning and overall successful transition from second level to the rest of their lives. They suggested several initiatives to improve awareness of LGBT+ issues for the whole school community, for example Pride Week, LGBT+ society, curriculum change, and teacher and student education.

'I was never physically bullied, thankfully. I was tall, skinny, and fast, so I was all right.'

'To this day, in the gym, I still stare straight ahead, get changed against the wall, and hope that nobody thinks that I am looking at them.'

'Gay marriage is okay, but same-sex couples should not have children' [teacher]

Final thoughts

It is only when unique student voices are heard that steps can be taken to create more-inclusive school environments.

Creating a successful, inclusive, high-quality school environment for LGBT+ students with respect to teacher-student and peer-peer interactions is challenging. It will require unwavering commitment from leaders and managers alike, as Neary and Cross (2018) found that school staff 'heard worrying stereotypes being reinforced by staff' (p.17). It is difficult to come to terms with the fact that LGBT+ students experience this in schools, and even more so that the sexual orientation or gender identity of a child can evoke feelings of fear in educators.

More must therefore be done to create school classrooms that are inclusive spaces of learning that allow all students to access the full range of the curriculum. Findings from this study confirm the immediate need to restructure secondary-school resources and supports, to adapt current school rules and procedures in order to promote a progressive and inclusive school culture that supports and encourages the personal and academic development of its LGBT+ students.

It is only when unique student voices are heard that steps can be taken to create more-inclusive school environments and ensure that the type of negative experiences reported by the participants in this study are not repeated.

A 2018–19 review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in primary and secondary schools identified, as a priority, the need to update the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum (NCCA, 2023). The increase from 70 to 100 hours of learning in SPHE over a three-year period at Junior Cycle offers opportunities particularly in RSE. The current curriculum provides opportunities for students to informally reflect upon and discuss relationships, sexuality, and healthy sexual expression.

Although we welcome these changes, they represent just the beginning of the significant change needed for the future wellbeing of all our students. We must challenge our thinking and consider whether this increase in SPHE hours is enough to alter people's perceptions. We must question whether the changes are prominent enough to support and encourage new ways of communicating in our schools in order to transform current school cultures into spaces of learning that are fully progressive and inclusive. The question remains: How can we, as educators of future generations, ensure that our schools offer an educational setting that is well-balanced, successful, and progressive?

Recommendations

The two most important recommendations to emerge from the findings of this study are:

- » Conduct a whole-school inclusive review with particular focus on strategies to prevent homophobic bullying, in which all parties have the opportunity to contribute feedback and opinions.
- » Engage with the organisational changes necessary to create an inclusive and respectful environment, in which all students can develop personally and academically, and where classrooms, corridors, and extracurricular facilities become places of respect for and tolerance of sexual orientation and gender identity.

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