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POST-PRIMARY SCHOOL EXPERIENCES OF 16-21 YEAR OLD PEOPLE WHO ARE LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL AND/OR TRANSGENDER (LGB&T)

KEY FINDINGS

Survey of LGB&T young people

- A majority of both LGB (69.4%) and transgender (61.5%) respondents had spoken to other pupils about their LGB or transgender identity and many felt supported by their peer group. Both LGB and transgender respondents were much less likely to have spoken about these issues with a member of staff but a majority of those who had reported being supported or very supported by the response.

- A minority of LGB respondents stated that their experience as an LGB pupil in post-primary school had a negative or very negative impact on their attainment (19.4%), attendance (21.9%) and career planning (15.0%). A greater proportion¹ of transgender respondents reported a negative or very negative impact on attainment (38.5%), attendance (41.5%) and career planning (35.9%).
- A majority of both LGB respondents (61.3%) and transgender respondents (73.8%) experienced a negative or very negative impact on their emotional wellbeing.
- Almost half of respondents (48.4%) had experienced bullying as a result of their sexual orientation or gender identity; responses to bullying from schools were not perceived to be very satisfactory by respondents.
- A minority of respondents (35.7%) indicated that LGB issues were presented and managed² 'well' or 'very well' by teachers; a similar proportion (36.1%) stated that teachers had handled LGB issues 'badly' or 'very badly'.
- A majority of respondents (63.1%) believed that transgender issues were handled 'badly' or 'very badly'.
- Many respondents (66.5%) indicated that they did not feel welcomed or valued within school as a young LGB&T person.
- Most respondents (92.1%) indicated that there was insufficient information available in relation to LGB&T issues within their post-primary school.

Focus Groups of LGB&T young people

- **Visibility:** LGB&T issues and people were largely absent from their education. Participants believed that this not only impacted on their ability to come to terms with their sexual orientation and gender in safe and supportive environments but also contributed to the high levels of homophobic and transphobic language and attitudes they witnessed in formal education.

¹ 65 respondents identified as transgender. Percentages should be treated with caution due to the small number of respondents.

² Question 48: 'How well do you think the teacher presented LGB issues and managed the discussion in class? Tick one' Options were 'Very Well', 'Well', 'Not Well', 'Badly' and 'Very Badly'.

- **Teaching and Learning:** The participants indicated that their teachers had been unwilling or unable to adequately educate them about issues relevant to their lives. Participants indicated that training on LGB&T issues for teachers is an important step in improving education for LGB&T young people.
- **Sexual Health Education³.** The participants felt that the relationships and sexuality education which was provided to them either ignored the needs of LGB&T young people or actively advocated against their interests. The participants had largely taught themselves about sex and relationships using the internet as a resource.
- **Transgender Specific Needs:** Participants recognised that transgender young people were significantly disadvantaged by schools not understanding them or their needs and that particular attention needs to be paid to names, pronouns, uniform, toilets and changing facilities.
- **Issues related to Confidentiality:** The participants stated that their concern about confidentiality is/was a significant barrier to them accessing support and reporting negative experiences within their schools. In particular, they articulated concerns about how, without their consent, parents and carers could be informed of a child's sexual orientation, or gender, by school authorities and how this could pose a risk for some young people.

³ Please note that 'sexual health education' is the wording that was used in the survey: this is the same as Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE).

INTRODUCTION

In 2015, Public and Corporate Economic Consultants (PACEC) were commissioned by the Department of Education to undertake research into the post-primary school experiences of 16-21 year old young people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender (LGB&T).

In September 2013 the Department's new Equality Scheme was approved by the Equality Commission. As the Department had not directly gathered any information on young LGB&T people since 2003 the then Minister agreed that three strands of research should be undertaken and that that the Department should:

- commission a set of questions in the Autumn 2014 Young Life and Times Survey (YLTS) that relate to LGB&T issues, but can be answered independently of gender/sexual orientation;
- use the DE School Omnibus Survey (a multi-purpose survey of all Principals in grant-aided schools) to pose questions to School Management in relation to homophobia/transphobia and information/support provided within schools on sexual orientation/transgender issues; and
- commission research about issues that affect young LGB&T people in post-primary education.

This research project makes up the latter strand of research.

The previous study by the Department of Education that directly gathered information on young LGB&T people was conducted in 2003 (Shout – Research into the needs of Young People in Northern Ireland who identify as lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and/or transgender (LGB&T)).

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

The project aims were to assess:

- the effect the school environment can have on young LGB&T people and the impact on their wellbeing and educational attainment;
- the extent to which the school curriculum reflects the needs of LGB&T pupils and the issues that they face; and
- how school policies/resources/curriculum/teaching/support can better reflect the needs of LGB&T pupils and the issues that they face.

KEY FINDINGS

Survey of Post-primary School Experiences of LGB&T Young People

Experiences of Transgender Young People in Post-primary School

- 65 respondents identified as transgender.
- 23 respondents had not told anyone in school about their transgender identity.
- 40 respondents had spoken to other pupils about their transgender identity and many felt supported by their peer group.
- 22 respondents had spoken to members of staff and, of those, 12 felt supported or very supported by the response.
- The key issues and challenges faced by transgender pupils included binary-gender classification⁴ and language/use of names in school.

⁴ Binary-gender classification is the classification of sex and gender into two distinct, opposite and disconnected forms of masculine and feminine.

- Particular arrangements which were put in place to help ten transgender respondents deal with the challenges they face/faced as a transgender pupil included name change, uniform change, use of alternative bathroom/ changing room and being excused from PE.

Experiences of LGB Young People in Post-primary School

- 467 respondents identified as LGB.
- 53.9% of respondents (n=130) came out as LGB while in post-primary school.
- 27.4% (n=128) of respondents had not spoken to anyone in school about their LGB identity.
- 69.4% of respondents (n=324) had spoken to other pupils in school regarding their LGB identity.
- 64.2% of LGB respondents (n=300) agreed or strongly agreed that they had a supportive group of friends at school.
- 20.1% (n=94) had spoken to members of staff in school regarding their LGB identity.
- Over 60% of respondents (n=42, base=69) who had spoken to a member of staff within school about their sexual orientation felt 'supported or very supported' by the reaction of the member of staff.
- Support included: in-school counselling; a meeting with the teacher responsible for pastoral care; provision of contact details for external organisations offering additional support.

Bullying Experienced by Young LGB&T People in Post-primary School

- 91.7% of respondents (n=487, base=531) were aware that their school operated an anti-bullying policy.
- 48.4% of respondents (n=257) had experienced bullying as a result of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

- The main forms of bullying experienced by LGB&T young people included name calling, lies or false rumours, being isolated by other pupils or hit/kicked/pushed/shoved around.
- 38.8% of respondents (n=99) reported bullying to a member of staff.
- Responses from schools were not perceived to be very satisfactory by respondents.
- 54.1% (n=53, base=98) of those who reported bullying felt 'very unsupported' or 'unsupported' by the member of staff's response.

Teaching and Learning in Post-primary Schools (including LGB&T issues in the curriculum)

- 54.5% of respondents (n=289) stated that issues about sexual orientation or gender identity had not come up in any of their classes.
- 71.4%, of respondents (n=172, base=241) who stated that issues about sexual orientation or gender identity had been mentioned stated it had been mentioned in Religious Education. Other classes where LGB&T issues were mentioned included Learning for Life and Work (40.2%, n=97) Sexual Health Education (24.1%, n=58) and English Literature (17.8%, n=43).
- 35.7% of respondents (n=86) indicated that LGB issues were presented and managed⁵ 'well' or 'very well' by teachers; a similar proportion stated that teachers had handled LGB issues 'badly' or 'very badly'.
- 63.1% of LGB&T respondents (n=147, base=233) believed that transgender issues were handled 'badly' or 'very badly'.
- 38.2% of respondents (n=203) stated they had been made to feel uncomfortable by teachers through the use of inconsiderate or derogatory language, taking a heteronormative approach, poor coverage of LGB&T issues etc.

⁵ Question 48: 'How well do you think the teacher presented LGB issues and managed the discussion in class? Tick one' Options were 'Very Well', 'Well', 'Not Well', 'Badly' and 'Very Badly'.

- 66.6% (n=351) said that the sexual health education⁶ delivered in their post-primary school was very unhelpful or unhelpful.

School Environment (school policies, resources, etc)

- 62.8% of respondents (n=333) reported a negative impact on emotional wellbeing.
- Less than 25% of respondents reported negative impacts on attendance, attainment or career planning.
- 66.5% of respondents (n=350) indicated that they did not feel welcomed or valued within school as a young LGB&T person.
- 5.9% of respondents (n=31) had to move school because of how their school had managed issues relating to their sexual orientation or gender identity.
- 54.7% of respondents (n=288) felt school was a safe place for them to be.
- 68.6% of respondents (n=365) found other pupils to be the most supportive and 12.8% (n=68) mentioned class teachers.
- 92.1%, of respondents (n=488, base=530) indicated that there was insufficient information available in relation to LGB&T issues within their post-primary school.

Focus Groups of LGB&T Young People

- **Visibility:** LGB&T issues and people were largely absent from their education. Participants believed that this not only impacted on their ability to come to terms with their sexual orientation and gender in safe and supportive environments but also contributed to the high levels of homophobic and transphobic language and attitudes they witnessed in formal education.

⁶ Please note that 'sexual health education' is the wording that was used in the survey: this is the same as Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE).

- **Teaching and Learning:** The participants indicated that their teachers had been unwilling or unable to adequately educate them about issues relevant to their lives. Participants indicated that training on LGB&T issues for teachers is an important step in improving education for LGB&T young people.
- **Sexual Health Education⁷:** The participants felt that the relationships and sexuality education which was provided to them either ignored the needs of LGB&T young people or actively advocated against their interests. The participants had largely taught themselves about sex and relationships using the internet as a resource.
- **Transgender Specific Needs:** Participants recognised that transgender young people were significantly disadvantaged by schools not understanding them or their needs and that particular attention needs to be paid to names, pronouns, uniform, toilets and changing facilities.
- **Issues related to Confidentiality:** The participants stated that their concern about confidentiality is/was a significant barrier to them accessing support and reporting negative experiences within their schools. In particular, they articulated concerns about how, without their consent, parents and careers could be informed of a child's sexual orientation, or gender, by school authorities and how this could pose a risk for some young people.

CONCLUSION

There is considerable variation in the experiences of young LGB&T people in post-primary school – the variation is evident across a number of characteristics including school type, geography, age, whether still attending or having left school, gender and sexual orientation. There are also differences in the experiences of those who are LGB and those who identify as transgender.

⁷ Please note that 'sexual health education' is the wording that was used in the survey: this is the same as Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE).

This suggests that there may be scope to identify approaches which would help to encourage a more progressive and welcoming environment for young LGB&T people, leading to more positive outcomes. These approaches could be shared as good practice across all schools. It is also important that any proposed policy approach includes some flexibility so that schools can adapt it to their own environment and particular set of circumstances.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this research comprised a mix of primary and desk based research. The main stages are described below.

Desk Based Research

The desk based research involved a review of various legislative and policy documents related to the research as well as a review of relevant literature and comparative studies. This set the context for the study, including the legislative context with regard to safeguarding the rights and ensuring equality of access, treatment and provision for LGB&T young people in schools and colleges in Northern Ireland. It also provided examples of other research including surveys which were used to inform the development of the questionnaire.

Survey of Young People

A survey was developed to gather feedback relating to the post-primary school experiences of members of the LGB&T community.

The final questionnaire included questions on:

- Respondent Profile;
- Experiences of Transgender Young People in Post-primary School;
- Experiences of LGB Young People in Post-primary School;

- Bullying Experienced by Young LGB&T People in Post-primary School;
- Teaching and Learning in Post-primary Schools (including LGB&T issues in the curriculum);
- School Environment (school policies, resources, etc).

The questionnaire was signed off by the Department of Education and launched through a variety of organisations on 6 January 2016. Overall, 532 valid responses were received and formed the basis for the analysis. Further details of response rate and representativeness is outlined in Appendix 1 of the main research report.

Focus Groups with Young People

Overall 5 focus groups were conducted with a total attendance of 28 young people (though as two people attended two groups there were 26 unique individuals).

THE PROJECT

The project was undertaken by Public and Corporate Economic Consultants (PACEC) and funded by the Department of Education. The total cost of the project was £28,690.

FULL REPORT

The full research report entitled “**Post-primary school experiences of 16-21 year old people who are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and/or Transgender (LGB&T)**” is available on the Department of Education website at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/>.

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION RESEARCH BRIEFINGS (2005 TO DATE)

Traveller children's experiences in mainstream post-primary schools in Northern Ireland: a qualitative study	RB 1/2005
The nature of Youth Work in Northern Ireland: purpose, contribution and challenges	RB 2/2005
Parental attitudes to the statutory assessment and statementing procedures on Special Educational Needs	RB 3/2005
A study into current practice and potential models for the effective teaching of Personal Development at Key Stage 3 in Northern Ireland curriculum	RB 4/2005
Language Development Programmes – coverage and effectiveness of Provision in Northern Ireland (0-36 months)	RB 1/2006
Attitudes of the Socially Disadvantaged towards Education in Northern Ireland	RB 2/2006
Effective Pre-school Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI)	RB 3/2006
The Development of Inclusive Schools in Northern Ireland: A Model of Best Practice	RB 4/2006
Department of Education Funded Research 2005/06	RB 5/2006
The recruitment and retention of teachers in post-primary schools in Northern Ireland	RB 6/2006
An evaluation of the need and early intervention support for children (aged 2-4 years) with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder in Northern Ireland	RB 1/2007
Alternative Education Provision (AEP) in Northern Ireland	RB 2/2007
The Nature and Extent of Bullying in Schools in the North of Ireland	RB 3/2007

Department of Education Funded Research 2006/07	RB 4/2007
An investigation of youth work, as a process of informal learning, in formal settings	RB 1/2008
E-Consultation with pupils – A pilot study	RB 2/2008
Good practice in literacy and numeracy in British and Irish cities	RB 3/2008
Department of Education Funded Research 2008/09	RB 1/2009
The Special Education Needs of Bilingual (Irish-English) Children	RB 2/2009
Audit of Counselling and Therapeutic Interventions in Primary school and Special Schools in the North of Ireland	RB 3/2009
Effective Pre School Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI) Pre-School Experience and Key Stage 2 Performance in English and Mathematics	RB 1/2010
School governors: the guardians of our schools	RB 2/2010
PISA 2009: Achievement of 15-year olds in Northern Ireland	RB 3/2010
Study into how the education system can improve the attendance of looked after children at post-primary school	RB 1/2011
Research into the Nature and Extent of Pupil Bullying in Schools in the North of Ireland	RB 2/2011
Needs assessment and feasibility study for the development of high level diagnostic tools in Irish for children with special educational needs in the Irish medium sector	RB 1/2012
Research into Improving Attendance in Schools Serving Deprived Areas	RB 2/2012
Taking Boys Seriously: A Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Male School-Life Experiences in Northern Ireland	RB 3/2012

PIRLS 2011 and TIMSS 2011: Achievement of Year 6 Pupils in Northern Ireland	RB 4/2012
Student achievement in Northern Ireland: Results in Mathematics, Science and Reading among 15-year olds from the OECD PISA 2012 Study	RB 1/2013
Exploring the characteristics of education systems which are successful in science	RB 1/2015
Dissemination of Best Practice in Teaching and Learning Research	RB 1/2017

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