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Experiences of young people with different sexual or gender identity

The Schools Health Education Unit's (SHEU) Health-Related Behaviour Questionnaire (HRBQ) has been running in different versions since the 1970s, providing schools and communities with a way of getting a more objective picture of the lives of young people.

SHEU has recently been engaged by the issues of sexual and gender identity in young people, and the different experiences that young people may be having. Sexual identity includes labels like gay, lesbian and bisexual (LGB); gender identity includes the idea of being transgender (T), feeling that your biological sex of male or female is not the same as your gender; many young people maybe unsure or questioning of their developing sexuality (U), and so work in this area may be pursued under the label of LGBTU.

Should SHEU ask questions about sexuality?

This is an essentially contested area, like so much in PSHE, where the issues of incorrect language and the potential of 'doing more harm than good' arise constantly in debate.

The arguments *for* asking questions about sexuality are familiar, about equalities, needs assessment, and so on. The purpose of the HRBQ is to find out about the needs of students, perhaps looking for common patterns in vulnerable groups, and we'll do all that better with a sexual identity question.

Arguments *against* might be:

We don't want to expose impressionable minds to things they won't understand...*(but it is important to understand sexuality and homophobia).*

We don't want to create an opportunity for premature identification...*(but that doesn't seem to be how sexuality works).*

The parents wouldn't like us to ask this question...*(not all of them, for sure, but some would, and perhaps more importantly, some students would).*

Students will be tempted to experiment and think it's normal...*(We can't believe a questionnaire is going to influence decisively their sexual behaviour but we'd like them to think it's at least acceptable to be gay [Is that the same as 'normal'? Differences in sexuality are part of the normal range that we see in different people, different societies and even different species.]).*

It's invasive...*(which is why the questionnaire is anonymous).*

It's more important to ask about behaviour -- there are men who identify as straight who have sex with men...*(but identity is an important issue too).*

We mustn't upset the parents...*(but we have experience of using an explicit question about sexual identity in one Authority*

without problems... yet we can't promise that no parent will ring up and complain).

This article reviews some recent findings using HRBQ.

Questions about sexual identity and gender identity

There are three questions in the SHEU questionnaires that refer to issues of sexual identity and which will be explored in this article. Question 1 is a very widely used question about worrying, which offers a dozen or so items and asks the secondary school student how often they worry about the issue:

1 How much do you worry about the issues listed below? 0 = Never 1 = Hardly ever 2 = A little 3 = Quite a lot 4 = A lot
Circle ONE number for each answer

| | | |
|---------------------------|-----------|--|
| School-work problems..... | 0 1 2 3 4 | ... |
| Exams and tests..... | 0 1 2 3 4 | Puberty and growing up..... 0 1 2 3 4 |
| Money problems..... | 0 1 2 3 4 | Thinking you are gay, lesbian or bisexual..... 0 1 2 3 4 |
| Bullying..... | 0 1 2 3 4 | |

Question 2 has been adjusted by local commissioners, for example, worrying about:

Being different..

| | | | |
|---|-----------|--|-----------|
| ...because of my religion..... | 0 1 2 3 4 | ...because of my sexuality..... | 0 1 2 3 4 |
| ...because of my culture and background.. | 0 1 2 3 4 | Other worries (please circle a number and describe below). | 0 1 2 3 4 |

Question 3 is about bullying which is also fairly widely used:

3 Do you think you are being picked on or bullied for any of the following?
Please circle ONE number on each line 0 = No 1 = Yes

| | | | |
|------------------------------------|-----|---|-----|
| Your size or weight..... | 0 1 | Your sexuality (straight, gay, lesbian or bisexual).. | 0 1 |
| The way you look..... | 0 1 | A disability..... | 0 1 |
| The clothes you wear..... | 0 1 | Because of someone in your family..... | 0 1 |
| Your colour, race or religion..... | 0 1 | Other (please write.....). | 0 1 |

Local survey only

These questions are for Year 10 and upwards only:

LGBT stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender.

Would you describe your sexuality as LGBT?

Please circle one answer

0 = No 1 = Yes 2 = Don't know 0 1 2

Do you have any friends who are LGBT?

Please circle one answer

0 = No 1 = Yes 2 = Don't know 0 1 2

Do you think there are good advice and support services in the county which are easy to access by LGBT young people?

Please circle one answer

0 = No 1 = Yes 2 = Don't know 0 1 2

Responses to these questions

The combined sample of secondary schools using our surveys in 2008 included 58,000 pupils. Of these, over 40,000 pupils were offered the question about worries and over half (more than 30,000 pupils) were offered the question about bullying. We also looked at a special sample of over 4,500 pupils in one local authority in the South East, where the more explicit question about LGBT identity was used with over 1,000 pupils in Year 10 and above. 4.8% of the pupils answering the worrying question said they worried about their

sexuality quite a lot or a lot; 3.8% of the pupils answering the bullying question said they were being bullied because of their sexuality.

6% of males and 3% of females in Years 10/11 in the South East sample said they identified themselves as LGBT. Over 40% said they had friends who are LGBT (while 15% said they did not know). 10% of pupils in Years 10/11 thought that there are good advice and support services in the county which are easy to access by LGBT young people (60% said they did not know).

We then looked for differences in the experiences of these young people, depending on their answers to these questions.

Experience of these young people

We looked at pupils in two local authorities; one rather rural authority in the North of England and one in the South-East of England.

In the first sample, we divided the pupils into two groups, those who worried about their sexuality and/or were bullied about it, and those who were neither.

In the second sample, we looked just at those who described their sexuality as LGBT.

We then went through the whole of the rest of the questions in the questionnaire, looking for differences.

With so many items to examine, we have selected only those which showed differences which were very unlikely to be due to chance ($p < 0.0001$).

Differences between Year 10 students who have concerns about sexuality (bullied or worried) in a sample from the North of England

Students with concerns about sexuality are...

More likely to report:

Had an accident in the last year requiring medical attention
 Been teased at school in the last month
 Other bullying or aggressive behaviours in last month
 Been bullied for other reasons than sexuality
 Enjoy lessons at school
 Miss lessons because of school worries
 Use Internet for help, advice, hobbies, chat
 Start a family post-16
 Spent money on sweets, comics, nightclubs, music, cigarettes, drugs, crisps, alcohol, pets, computer games
 Watched TV last night, played computer games, chatted/texted on the phone, looked after pets, helping/volunteering
 Skipped breakfast
 Eat fizzy drinks, sweets, chips on most days
 Ever regularly over-eaten, used extreme dieting methods
 Do judo, gym, dancing, American football, rollerskating/blading, skateboarding weekly at least in season

Less likely to report:

Feel safe at/going to/from school
 Satisfied with life
 School lessons about drugs were useful
 Other PSHE topics including lessons about prejudice and bullying were useful
 High self-esteem scores
 Rate various other aspects of school as positive
 Continue in FT education post-16
 Live with both parents
 Perceive themselves in control of their life
 Eat dairy, bread, vegetables, water, on most days
 School is main source of information about drugs

More likely to report continued:

Drink alcohol and smoked last week
 Tried illegal drugs
 Worry about many other issues, including money, friends, family, looks, changing for PE/showering, STIs, crime, wars and terrorism
 Had fillings on last visit to dentist
 Worried about GP keeping things private (confidentiality)
 Asthma and wheezing (asthma symptoms)
 Had sex or be in a sexual relationship

Less likely to report continued:

School is main source of information about sex
 Understanding of HIV/AIDS, intention to avoid STIs like HIV
 Use contraception (if they have had sex)

Differences between Year 10/11 students who identify as L/G/B/T and those who do not in sample from South East of England

This SE sample was smaller than the sample used to derive the set of findings above. With a smaller sample, we expect to get a shorter list of findings at a given level of statistical significance, and this is just what we have found.

Students who identify as L/G/B/T are...

More likely to report:

Been bullied (teased or other aggressive behaviour) in the last month
 Want there to be less bullying at school
 There's someone they miss badly (because of death or illness)
 Use library/disco/skate park/shelter weekly
 Have LGBT friends
 Think there are accessible services for LGBT students
 Used cannabis

Less likely to report:

Cereal or toast for breakfast
 Car or bus to get to school
 Enjoy school
 Identify reasons to discourage getting drunk
 Voted in school election
 Adults involve you in decisions at home

Conclusion

These samples were widely separated, so we cannot assume that the experiences of these two groups would overlap at all. If they did, we could say that youngsters who are worried or bullied about sexuality have a generally poorer experience of school and other aspects of life while the SE sample suggests that identifying as LGBT can of itself lead to worse experience of school or elsewhere. These findings are mostly negative as regards the experiences and lifestyle choices of young people with LGBT identity or LGBT concerns -- and so are of immediate concern for anyone who has contact with young people. However, the picture is by no means simple or simply understood -- so, while young people in the selected group in the Northern sample report that they are more likely to miss lessons because of school worries, they are also more likely to enjoy lessons at school.

The communities in question will decide how best to react to these findings. From our point of view we can conclude that the HRBQ can shed light on the different experiences of young people with different sexual and gender identity.

We have combined responses from male and female pupils for this article for reasons of space; there is another layer of detail that we could have examined beyond these headline findings, and perhaps we will find time and space to do this soon. In the meantime, we invite readers' comments on these findings.