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# Homophobic Bullying in Irish Education

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 in adulthood (Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Sheridan, 1995; Inglis, 1999; Lodge and Lynch, 2004).

There has also been some considerable research into the culture of masculinity and its significance for the production of

homophobia and how masculine culture can shape school relations (Epstein and Johnson, 1994; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Redman, 1994; Kehily and Nayak, 1996; Plummer, 1999) and overall there seems to be a consensus that young men tend to develop negative attitudes toward homosexuality as part of their achieving a masculine identity (Nayak and Kehily, 1997) or as part of their initiation into what

is considered to be mainstream masculinity (Plummer, 1999). In other words homophobia and homophobic bullying have been shown to be a negative consequence of gender role stereotyping.

### **Awareness in Ireland**

Since the early 1990s there has been an increased awareness in Ireland and elsewhere of the negative effects of bullying in schools and consequently there has been an increase in the amount of international research into this phenomenon (Mellor, 1990; Mooj, 1993; Olweus, 1993; Whitney and Smith, 1993; Rigby, 1996; O'Moore, 1997). Some researchers have argued that not enough attention has been paid to the relationship between gender and/or sexuality and bullying (Duncan, 1999; Leonard, 2002) while others have shown that those who are identified as standing out or being different, such as LGBT students, are more likely to be bullied (Norman, 2006).

### **Homophobic bullying**

It is no surprise then that students perceived as gay or lesbian are often the first targets of bullies in schools. Homophobic bullying has been described as occurring:

... where general bullying behaviours such as verbal and physical abuse and intimidation is accompanied by or consists of the use of terms such as gay, lesbian, queer or lezzy by perpetrators. (Douglas et al. 1997)

However, homophobic bullying is more complex in reality than the above description reflects and can be divided into at least two sub-types of behaviour.

Firstly, there is a type of bullying that underpins the heteronormative ethos of the school environment. With this type of behaviour LGBT students are not necessarily the targets of the bullying but

because of the words used it has a negative effect on them.

The second type of homophobic bullying has to do with the actual direct persecution of persons known or suspected to be lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (Duncan, 1999; Thurlow 2001). It seems that in order to stave off any accusations of homosexuality boys must engage in this form of compulsive heterosexual masculinity when in groups and central to this is homophobic and sexist language and behaviour (Pascoe, 2007, p. 114).

### **Recent research**

Recent qualitative research conducted among students, parents, teachers and senior management teams in schools in Ireland revealed a number of themes which might explain the presence of homophobic bullying (O'Higgins-Norman, 2008). The research showed that in order to be considered normal boys and girls must be heterosexual and clearly masculine or feminine.

It was also found that many students and some adults in schools experienced a fear of all things homosexual which led to discriminatory behaviour. This fear seemed to arise from a lack of informed knowledge about homosexuality. Young people were also found to have very limited experience of gay or lesbian people relying solely on media and peer led stereotypes instead. As a result of this lack of knowledge and a certain amount of acquiescence on the part of teachers, many young people engaged in and dismissed the impact of homophobic name calling.

The research in Ireland pointed to the need to look anew at relationships and sexuality education.

For references and further reading:

O'Higgins-Norman, J. (2008) *Homophobic Bullying in Irish Secondary Education*. Palo Alto, California: Academica Press.