

Positioning discourse on homophobia in schools: What have lesbian and gay families got to say?

Christine Cocker

Senior Lecturer in Social Work – University of East Anglia, UK

Dr Trish Hafford Letchfield

Reader in Social Work Research – Middlesex University, UK



Rainbow HAS

Research Project

- Examined homophobic bullying in schools in 6 European countries: England, Spain, Italy, Bulgaria, Belgium and the Netherlands.
- Concerned with investigating practice in a number of different areas, including addressing the problem of trans/homophobia and trans/homophobic bullying (including language), which the children of gay or lesbian partnerships may experience at school, which is what I will talk about today



Rights
against
Intolerance
BUILDING an
OPEN-MINDED
WORLD



CO-FUNDED BY THE EUROPEAN
UNION'S FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS
AND CITIZENSHIP PROGRAMME.

Structure for research project



Stages of research

- 1.1 Literature review
- 1.2 'generic' families
- 1.3 children who have experienced homophobic bullying
- 1.4 LGBT families
- 1.5 family networks and associations

Sample size

- 10 families
- 5 'cases' via teacher and bullying and harassment officer
- 5 LGBT families
- 5 family networks and associations

Methodology & sample

Pre-agreed methodology for all countries

- Structured interviews using template developed by PI's in each country



How to obtain sample

- “In general, interviewees and targets of case studies are to be found through personal contacts, snowball technique, parents’ associations in schools, associations of relatives of LGBT youngsters, associations of homosexual parents, gay and lesbian associations.”

Analysis

Thematic analysis of the gathered data was done within the guidelines set by the European HAS steering committee. The questions developed for the interview were based on guidance notes given to us by this European-wide steering group.

This presentation focuses on

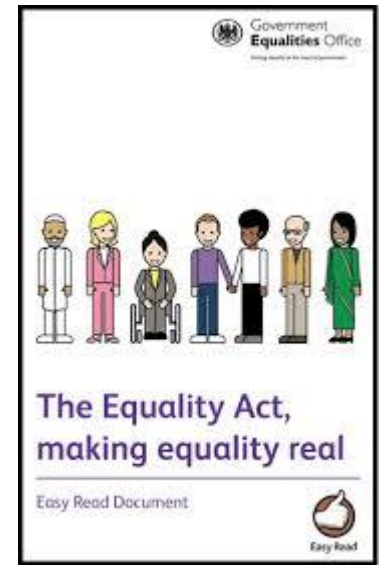
- LGBT experiences of school community and strategies used to integrate;
- relationships within the family;
- family/school alliances.





Context

- Themes for bibliositography
- Policy and legislation in England already developed
- Critical turning points over last 10 years with enormous legal changes
- Department for Education guidance on homophobic bullying is policy
- Unresolved issues
- Analysing the value of 'building blocks'
- What is the everyday experience for children in the classroom?



From then....

House of Lords judgement in 1976

‘Change in public attitudes should not entitle the courts to relax in any degree the vigilance and severity with which they should regard the risk of children at critical ages being exposed or introduced to ways of life which may lead to severance from normal society, to psychological stresses and unhappiness and possibly even to physical experiences which may scar them for life’

(Hanscombe and Forster, 1982: 67).

To now....

Prime Minister David Cameron Speaking about the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act, June 2013:

“There will be girls and boys in school today who are worried about being bullied and concerned about what society thinks of them because they are gay or lesbian. By making this change they will be able to see that Parliament believes their love is worth the same as anyone else’s love and that we believe in equality. I think this will enable them to stand that bit taller, be that bit more confident and I am proud of that.”

Michael Gove declares war on the use of the word 'gay' as an insult

- Education Secretary said the homophobic language is 'medieval'
- Said hate speech laws need to be properly policed to stamp out bullying
- Daily Mail: 6.7.13



Substantial legislative change in UK over 10 years

- the 2000 Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act,
- the 2002 Adoption and Children Act,
- the 2003 Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations
- the 2004 Civil Partnership Act
- the 2006 Equality Act
- the 2007 Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations,
- the 2008 Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act
- the 2010 Equality Act

Findings: LGBT families

- The reality was these were LG families (no BT). This is not uncommon.
- We interviewed 7 parents in 5 families, who had 9 children between them
- 6 boys and 3 girls
- All families were couples; 3 Lesbian and 2 Gay Men.
- 3 of the families had adopted children
- 3 of the families had birth children and primarily lived with their mums.
- All birth children knew and had regular contact with both biological parents.

Findings



Different families

The experiences of children with lesbian and gay parents

*Click here
to read our
families research*

1.4 LGBT families

- Who is in the community in the school?
- Insider/outsider – constantly ‘coming out’ to teachers, other children and other children’s parents
- Use of silence by teachers as avoidance of the issues
- Capitalising on the rich experience that lesbian and gay families have in dealing with adversity

All families we interviewed were politically active

LGBT’s sexuality was not the most important thing that affected their child’s experience in school



Findings

- The way families come to be families determines how children may deal with issues
- Complexity of this topic – avoiding a reductionist approach
- Lack of evidence about what works



EVIDENCE

Deconstructing dominant accounts of family life

Comments made in the school playground:

- “When children say that’s not your real mum, this could be an issue for any child. There has to be a confidence in dealing with other people’s curiosity by LGBT parents.”

Gay father (2013)

“Where the gay thing plays out differently is that every single person who comes to our house, asks about it, where you got them, where they came from, particularly children, as the parents are slightly embarrassed about it. The adoption group at school, adoptive parents worry about whether they should tell someone or not. It’s a bit like coming out. We are the opposite, there is no way you can pretend, as gay men, it has to be explained and I am endlessly telling people the story of how we came together. It’s never an unpleasant thing. Both of you share that relationship with the school.”

(Cocker and Hafford-Letchfield, in press)

Focus on relationality - grappling with the priorities of children rather than dividing practices (Foucault, 1972)

- For adopted children, their adopted family structure or having gay parents are not their main concerns

“Class is totally the issue, for the children coming into a posh family where nothing about their previous lives that would make any sense. There is a sense of wanting to wipe the slate clean, for example, the whole thing about coming to London, having to reframe their lives, all of which fits the dream of being adopted. Definitely, that was the thing, the changes that they have made, have been totally about that and not about gay parenting”.

Gay father (2013)

(*Cocker and Hafford-Letchfield, in press*)

Social Capital

- A: “It's been a very easy ride, it's been a very easy ride, you know totally sort of accepted....well, it's just not an issue.... You know the odd little thing has come up over through school... fathers days or things like that...you know things have come up...but other than that it's literally just not been an issue...sorry...”
- B: When N was small... if we're going back 15 years, you know it was still sort of... I guess we were the second wave of parents as some lesbian parents have kids who are in their 30s. But when we had N it was still fairly unusual. You know I think it would be quite different now.
- A: We've lost our uniqueness... how galling is that?!
 - Lesbian mothers (2013)

My experience at school

Children with gay parents don't like the way the word 'gay' is used as an insult in primary and secondary school. Some children said they try and stop people using the word in this way, but find it difficult.

Children say that teachers think the word 'gay' is a bit like a swear word and they don't respond to anti-gay language in the same way they respond to racist language.

Even when children with gay parents are very young they have to answer lots of questions from their friends about their family. This makes them feel unusual.

Once people understand, the questions stop but they start again when children move to different classes or schools

Some children with gay parents find it easy to answer these questions, but others find it annoying and uncomfortable.

Some of the children are worried about bullying – especially when they first go to secondary school but many children with gay parents haven't experienced any bullying because their parents are gay.

But when children in primary and secondary school do experience bullying to do with having gay parents, schools aren't always very good at doing anything about it.

Children with gay parents said that lesbian, gay or bisexual people or families are never mentioned in schools and they find this difficult and it makes them feel invisible.

Sometimes this means they don't tell people they have gay parents. They are worried about what may happen if other children know they have gay parents. This is stressful and they wish they could tell other people about their families.

Children with gay parents want their schools to talk about different families and stop homophobic bullying. This would make them feel more able to be themselves in school.

Discourses of blame, survival and 'ordinariness'

- 1. Blame: historical approaches to lesbians and gay men as parents – blamed for immoral behaviour, somehow subverting children
- 2. Survival: being 'as good as' – not 'damaging' children's development
- 3. Being ordinary: finally (!!) we can begin to move beyond reductionist methodologies
 - There are strengths to what lesbians and gay men bring to the parenting table:
 - Getting involved in school life
 - Getting involved politically
 - Social capital
 - Resilience
 - Tried and tested personal support networks
 - **But there are still challenges ahead.**

Family 2: Don't problematise our families – we don't!

- “This leads to people funding initiatives around the bullying, creates picture of us as victims, whereas LGBT are very accustomed to dealing with and negotiating difficulties.”
 - Gay dad, family 2

Deconstructing families in the context of understanding and responding to homophobic bullying

- Not just a 'training package' issue
- Embed within broader strategy in responding to all bullying which incorporates intersectionality
- School cultures and discourse around homophobia/transphobia
- Consulting and voice of the child/young person
- Hegemonic discourse around 'the family' (Hicks, 2014)
- Draw on the experiences of the LGBT community in addressing adversity
- Research – what does it need to focus on?



References

- Cocker, C., Hafford-Letchfield (2014) (eds) *Rethinking Anti-Discriminatory and Anti-Oppressive Theories for Social Work Practice*. Basingstoke, Palgrave.
- Foucault, M. (1972[1969]) *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, London: Routledge.
- Hicks, S. (2014) 'Deconstructing the Family' in Cocker, C., Hafford-Letchfield (2014) (eds) *Rethinking Anti-Discriminatory and Anti-Oppressive Theories for Social Work Practice*. Basingstoke, Palgrave.