



“I am what I am...”

Examining the experiences of
openly gay and lesbian
teachers in a period of declining
homophobia

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Government survey 2018

6.2.3 LGBT issues in primary education

A small number of respondents (239) made specific reference to primary education, making the case for education on LGBT issues at this stage. Their broad argument was that challenging what they saw as the heteronormativity of these formative years would have a positive knock-on effect, both in supporting those who are not heterosexual or gender conforming, and in encouraging tolerance amongst their heterosexual peers by normalising it. Some participants also noted the long-term negative impact that bullying, discrimination and abuse during primary school had on their wellbeing.

Government survey

The education system doesn't do enough to protect its LGBT+ students and does nothing to stop homophobic and transphobic language being used in schools.

Gender identity not given, bisexual, 16-17, Scotland

Stonewall Teachers' Report 2014

- There has been **no real improvement** in the proportion of teachers who believe that their head teacher or school governors (in England and Wales) demonstrate clear leadership in tackling homophobic bullying.

Stonewall School Report 2017

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'Equality for LGBT staff and pupils must not be a 'nice to do if you have time' issue for schools'

Anne Lyons
28th June 2017 at 16:06



Equality LGBT+

Schools desperately need to take a zero tolerance approach towards homophobic and transphobic bullying, writes one heads' leader

I was shocked to read the [latest research from Stonewall](#), the organisation that campaigns for better rights for LGBT people, which says that nearly half of all students still face homophobic bullying.

The figure is falling, so we are making progress. But it's still way too high.

News > Education > Education News

Homophobic bullying in schools falls by a third in a decade, study finds

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer and transgender pupils are still at risk, charity warns, with as many as two in three trans children reported to have attempted suicide

Rachael Pella Education Correspondent | @rachpella | Tuesday 27 June 2017 13:20 BST | [STONEWALL](#)

f t e 26



Generally, children are more likely to be taught about LGBT issues in the classroom than they were a decade ago

Young less likely to suffer bullying over sexuality than decade ago, says report

Stonewall said that while the findings showed an improvement for young people in many ways, there is still much more to do.



PA

Last updated: 27 June 2017, 08:10 BST

Print this story

School Report: open survey of over 3000 participants
(intended sample = LGBT students in school)

Climates

Hostile

- Section 28
- Homophobic

Conditionally
tolerant

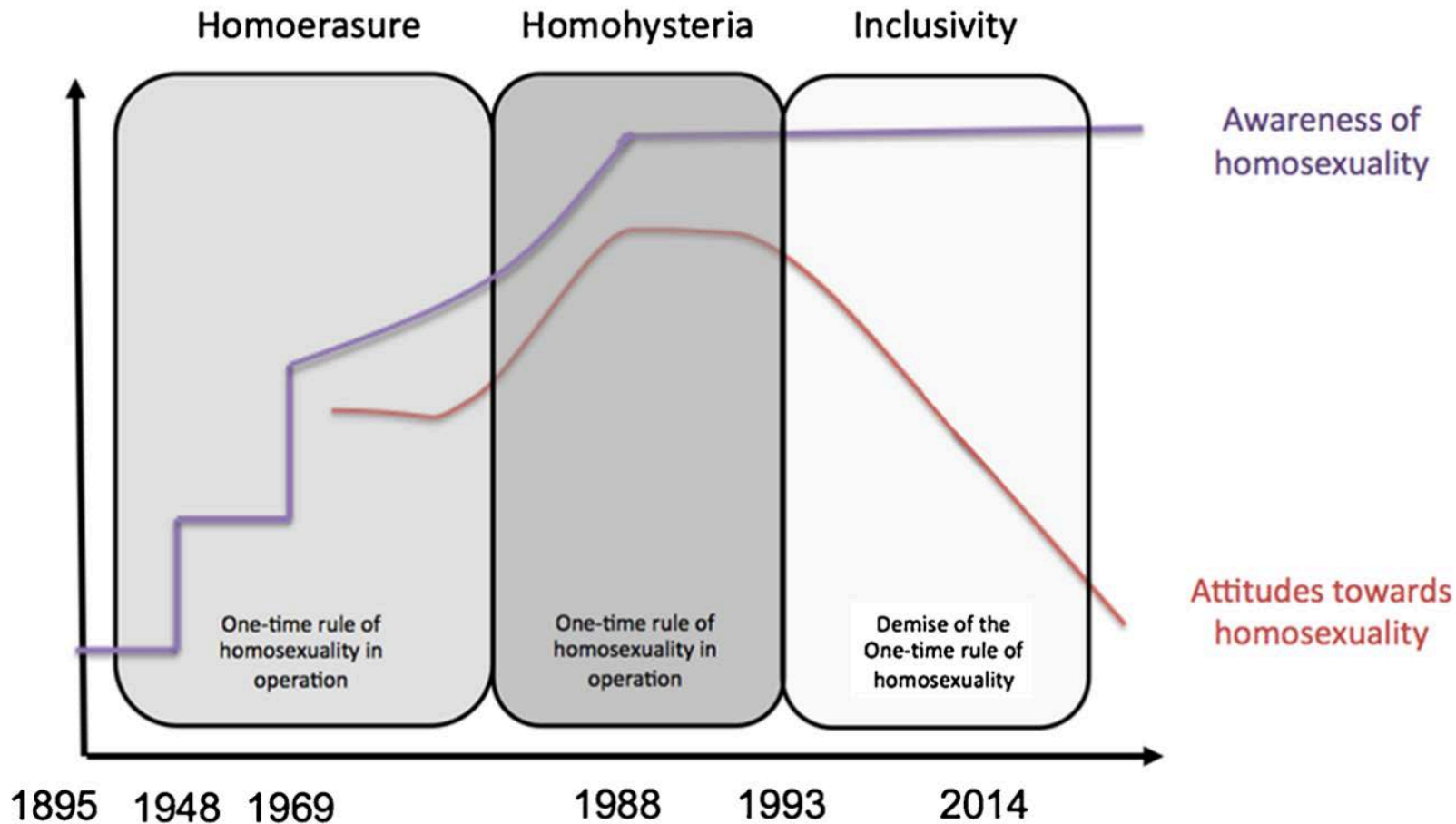
- Glass closet
- Don't ask, don't tell
- Edwards et al. 2014 - teachers

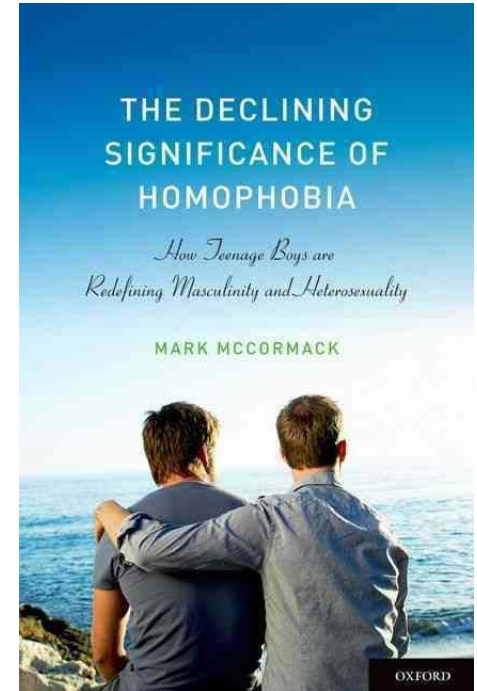
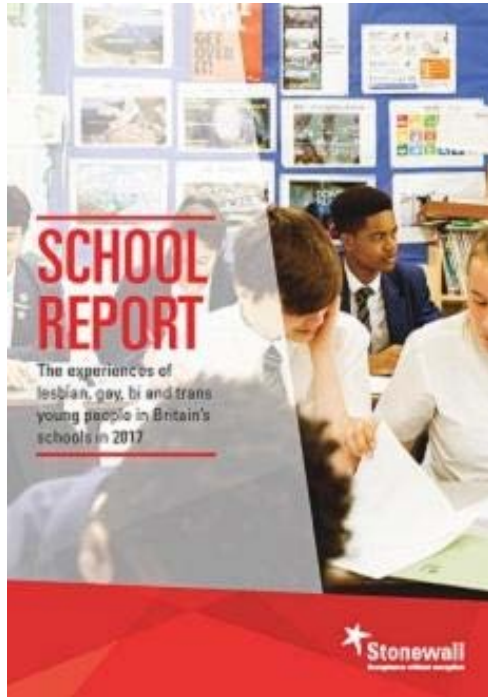
Open and
inclusive

- McCormack 2011 – students



Homohysteria





Cultural change



Previous research

- Countries
 - Australia (Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013)
 - England (Gray, 2013) - data from 2008
 - Ireland (Neary, 2012; Fahie, 2016)
 - America (Connell, 2015)
- Subject specific
 - Physical Education teachers (Sykes, 2009; Edwards et al., 2014)
 - Music teachers (Palkki, 2015).
- Edwards et al., (2014) state, 'One such knowledge gap is in understanding the **lived experiences** of lesbian and gay teachers working in schools following the abolition of Section 28' (p. 3).

Participant overview

	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Years teaching	Types of school	Subject Area	Leadership position
Participant 1	30	Male	White British	3 years	Secondary, Private	P.E	No
Participant 2	31	Female	White British	2 years	Primary School	Primary	No.
Participant 3	34	Male	White British	14 years	Multi-academy, secondary, comprehensive	English	Yes – SLT (Dept)
Participant 4	24	Male	White British	3 years	Primary school	Primary	No.
Participant 5	39	Male	White European	15 years	Secondary, independent	English	Yes – Head of 6th
Participant 6	30	Female	White British	8 years	Secondary, faith school	P.E	Yes - pastoral
Participant 7	26	Female	White British	4 years	Secondary, comprehensive, academy	P.E, DT	Yes – pastoral
Participant 8	44	Female	White British	16 years	Secondary	P.E	Yes – pastoral
Participant 9	23	Female	Traveller British	2 years	Primary	Primary	No
Participant 10	46	Female	White British	22 years	Primary, faith school	Primary	No
Participant 11	54	Female	White British	15 years	Secondary/FE	Business	No
Participant 12	46	Female	White British	21 years	Secondary	P.E.	Yes – SLT (Asst)

Trailblazers – impact on students

Participant 1: “I've got feedback from pupils in different years - there's a few of them that on the notes they gave me saying you know **'thank you'** without them saying their names they say that **they're part of the LGBT community** so they felt supported so there are definitely out pupils within the school for sure.”

Participant 7: “I would say in the last few years there's been **more of an open kind of talking point**. I mean I've got year 7 lads that are out I've got a year 10 girl that's transgender”

Participant 8: I think that's quite comforting in a thought that my students coming to me saying this is where I'm currently at...what advice would you give me? **Whereas they wouldn't necessarily go to another member of staff.**

Participant 3: “I've **only had 3 pupils** come out to me”

Participant 11: And I'm not saying out on out role model, but definitely I think they think, 'oh do you know what it will be alright...whatever I'm thinking or feeling it's going to be alright. So I can go off to university and I can do this and I can do that'.

Trailblazing – impact on staff

Participant 3: So I think everyone knew she was gay and she left, so for a while there wasn't an out member of staff until I came out and **now we've got loads.**

Participant 5: So one of my colleagues who's gay, she said to me a few years ago, "you're the acceptable face of homosexuality" as a sort of joke because **I do seek to set a good example.**

Participant 8: Yeah it was actually, **it was after me.** When I came to the school...and actually she's more open and out than I am really if I think about it.

Trailblazer – impact on behaviour

Participant 1: **Yes for sure, 100%**. Obviously it's quite a masculine department but people are a **lot more aware of what they're saying** and what they're doing and how things can be perceived and that kind of thing so that's probably been the biggest difference for sure.

Participant 3: I do have quite a **lot of influence over people's perceptions** of what gay people are and aren't and that sort of thing so I think that is really important.

Participant 7: Yeah, I think when I was at school I was crying out for somebody to speak to

Coming out – being outed

Participant 1: Well that was **taken out of my control** a little bit where again there's various versions of this from a couple of different members of staff telling the kids through conversations to one of the sixth form boys knowing about it and then deciding to kind of tell various kids through different years for whatever reason about me.

Participant 2: truly honestly it took maybe two months **-the joy of social media** - once I'd started adding people on Facebook they kind of realised but they never actually really asked but yes I'm definitely out

Participant 9: : Erm...thrown out, flat on my face...

Coming out – partially

Participant 12: So in terms of students - **no - I've never ever discussed any of that side with my students.**

Participant 8: There's obviously been conversations about it but never ever directly to me but if a child **did say that to me I think I'd definitely, at this point in my teaching, would say yes to them**

Coming out – quietly

Participant 3: It's not okay just strolling in and singing 'I am what I am', you'd have the shock of your life...sorry that was outrageously stereotypical. I've never really had to kind of make that announcement because **I have just dropped it into conversation**

Participant 4: if someone asks me a question I just talk about my partner and **slip in the fact it's a he**

Participant 5 So my colleagues came to know just **through general conversation** I didn't make a point of coming out to them it's just that they became aware that that's what it was and it wasn't a secret

Participant 6: I had a friend who had already worked there so she'd already told them a little bit about me and she was also gay. So I mean it was kind of, I didn't really say anything...**I've never had to come out as you would.**

Participant 7: It **wasn't a big issue** at all; to be honest it was more of like a joke and a bit of a banter, point of banter in the department.

Participant 10: **think I even mentioned it in my interview** actually at that school

Participant 11: **It would just emerge.**

Coming out – to students

Participant 3: I quite enjoyed doing it, I kind of miss it in a way, **you know just dropping it in**, now husband, but then, back then it was boyfriend

Participant 7: In my head of house role, had to speak to them and say "it's okay, it's alright to feel like that but obviously you can't throw upon your feelings on other people because they might not quite know how to deal with it I kind of said **"from my experience, you know"** and I said, I think from year 9 upwards **I've said openly that "from my experience, I'm out"**

Participant 11 (pupils): I certainly felt very comfortable talking about my partner amongst them, **wouldn't offer it but when asked I would say**

It's private!

Participant 1: **None of their business** really.

Participant 4: I don't feel like bringing **too much of your home life** in is a good thing to me I just don't

Participant 8: I think from a teachers point of view I know that there has been times that I've thought 'maybe you should just be more open with your sexuality' and there's another time where I think, **I think the professional line**, there has to be there professional line which I've said before, you know with kids, how much do they need to know about that. Do they need to know about that? Probably not.

Participant 9: I think I'm a very **private person** in general, I don't talk about a lot, I've always kept home and work very separate

Participant 11: **Work is work and home is home**

Participant 12: I tend to keep my **home life and my work life quite separate**

The fear – subject specific

Participant 6: “As a teacher I don't think it affects you know my lessons or my teaching but certainly I am more cautious you know when **I teach gymnastics and you have to support**...you know I'm very careful about that and you know, I make sure that I'm very clear about how I'm going to support them and which perhaps if I wasn't gay I wouldn't, I wouldn't be as worried about it”

The measure of 'straightness'

Participant 4: Just purely something personal to me, I don't feel like...**even if I was straight** I don't think I'd mention it in front of the children .

Participant 5: Yes, my rule is - if I've **observed a straight colleague say it or do it in an appropriate?** And in an appropriate way then it's okay for me.

Participant 6: I just, it's not something that I would think you know it's appropriate to share with pupils in general. **In the same way if I was straight** I wouldn't be talking about if I had a boyfriend or whatever.

Participant 8: I think the students are aware but they don't necessarily talk about it like they would talk about **any other members of staff's private life**, does that make sense?

Participant 12: Because I feel that I'm able to develop very professional working relationships with my students and **irrespective of my sexuality** that's a line that I don't cross. It would be no different if my sexuality were different.

General conclusion

- Language is changing

Positives

- Teachers are coming out
- Pupils are coming out
- Positively affecting teaching
- From hostile to conditionally tolerant/open and inclusive

Negatives

- Climate – hostile, conditionally tolerant, open and inclusive
- Reverse relative deprivation
- Fear
- Public vs private on going debate



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