

Taking the Temperature

Developing and Piloting an
LGBT-Positive School Climate
Evaluation Tool for Post-Primary
Schools in Ireland



Institiúid Oideachais
Institute of Education

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Introduction

The following report has been developed by researchers at ABC – National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre (ABC) at Dublin City University in conjunction with the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN) arising from a pilot study funded by the Irish Research Council's New Foundations Scheme 2015.

The project responded directly to the Department of Education and Skill's Action Plan on Bullying (2013), which recommended the development of this type of intervention¹, and to a key study commissioned by the Equality Authority², which stressed that Irish schools need to adopt a whole-school approach to LGBT inclusivity, including in particular whole school evaluation.

ABC is a national research and resource facility at DCU Institute of Education. Researchers at ABC were the first in Ireland to undertake research on school bullying (1996), workplace bullying (1999), homophobic bullying (2004) and cyberbullying (2009). ABC leads the field of research, resource development, and training in bullying in Ireland and is an internationally recognised centre of excellence in bullying research.

The Centre's activities are funded by the Department of Education & Skills under the National Action Plan on Bullying (2013), the Irish Research Council, the EU's Erasmus+ Framework Program for Education, Training, Youth and Sport, and the Fulbright Commission, Enterprise Ireland, the Ireland Canada University Foundation and DCU Research & Innovation Support Unit. The Centre is a strategic partner with the *Norwegian Centre for Learning Environment and Behavioural Research in Education*, the *Cyberbullying Research Centre (USA)* and *Friends International Centre Against Bullying (Sweden)*.

Summary of Findings

- Participants reported relatively low levels of physical bullying or physical sexual harassment.
- Surprisingly, the main factor in other types of bullying (being called hurtful names, having mean rumours spread about you, being excluded) in all three schools was body shape/size. Teachers were surprised by this finding and were inclined to attribute it to increased image awareness created by social media.
- Apart from pejorative use of the word 'gay', the most frequently heard negative remarks were about other students' size or body weight.
- In keeping with the literature, most participants were reluctant to report incidents of bullying to school staff.
- Students reported low levels of intervention in the case of students making negative remarks about other students (on the basis of gender, sexuality, body size, ethnicity, disability, etc.).
- Most teachers and students were welcoming of this type of student-centered initiative.
- Actively fostering an all-school culture of inclusivity appears to have a positive result on the school's inclusivity performance. However, more research is needed, which compares schools of the same type (e.g. single-sex) but with different levels of commitment to inclusivity in order to establish this more clearly.
- Schools generally do not have the time or resources to administer issue-specific surveys, and need broader instruments that can evaluate the diversity climate generally, taking into account a range of issues (gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, etc.).

¹ See p. 5, Programme for Government aspires to "develop anti-bullying policies and in particular, strategies to combat homophobic bullying to support students" and p.9, which states that "that preventing and tackling homophobic and transphobic bullying in particular can lead to a significant improvement in the school climate for all".

² Addressing Homophobic Bullying in Second-Level Schools (2010), James O'Higgins Norman, Michael Goldrick and Kathy Harrison. The Equality Authority.

Aims of the Study

The project set out to develop and pilot a survey tool, which second-level schools can use to evaluate the positivity of their school climate and culture in relation to attitudes towards difference and diversity, with specific reference to LGBT identity. It was envisaged that the tool would be particularly useful in preventing / dealing with homophobic and transphobic bullying. It was developed by the Principal Investigator, Dr. Debbie Ging of the National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre in Dublin City University, in collaboration with the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network's (GLEN) then Director of Education Policy Change, Sandra Irwin-Gowran, and Research Assistant, Joshua Savage. The project responded directly to the DES Action Plan on Bullying (2013), which recommended the development of this type of intervention³, and to a key study commissioned by the Equality Authority⁴, which stressed that Irish schools need to adopt a whole-school approach to LGBT inclusivity, including in particular whole school evaluation.

As well as adopting a whole-school approach, it is often necessary to provide support directly to individual students and staff who experience homophobic / transphobic bullying (O'Higgins et al., 2010: 49). This is far easier to identify and deal with if the school has an LGBT Climate Survey procedure in place.

Methodology and Profile of Participants

The project ran from February to November 2016. The research team worked together to review similar resources in other countries⁵, bearing in mind that the specificities of the Irish education system and Irish cultural, social and legal particularities required a uniquely customized tool. In consultation with the advisory committee, a pilot survey was drafted and built by the research team using Bristol Online Surveys, a statistical software application.

Throughout the month of May, the research team conducted three pilot studies in a single-sex boys' school (164 student participants), a single-sex girls' school (153 student participants) and a co-educational school (101 student participants). The three schools included in the pilot study were an all-girls' Catholic school in an affluent suburb of Dublin, an all-boys' Catholic school in a socially mixed suburban village and a co-educational (mixed gender) community college in a relatively affluent suburb. Approximately half of the participating students in each school were in second year (12-13 years) and half in either fourth or fifth year (15-17 years). In October, the research team presented the findings to each school in the context of a focus group with key stakeholders (chaplains, guidance counsellors, principals, teachers).

³ See p. 5, Programme for Government aspires to "develop anti-bullying policies and in particular, strategies to combat homophobic bullying to support students" and p.9, which states that "that preventing and tackling homophobic and transphobic bullying in particular can lead to a significant improvement in the school climate for all".

⁴ Addressing Homophobic Bullying in Second-Level Schools (2010), James O'Higgins Norman, Michael Goldrick and Kathy Harrison. The Equality Authority.

⁵ For example, the existing and highly successful School Climate Survey instrument used by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network in the United States (GLSEN) <http://www.glsen.org/article/2013-national-schoolclimate-survey>

Findings

While comparative analysis indicates some quite significant differences between the schools, it does not necessarily follow that these findings are representative of these types of schools. A larger, statistically significant sample would be required to establish this. However, the qualitative responses give some clues regarding the extent to which certain findings may be generalizable. The findings are organized into subheadings below that reflect the key themes of the questionnaires.

Belonging and feeling safe

Of all 418 participants surveyed, 65% said they felt that they completely belonged in their school, 30.4% said they felt that they sort of belonged, while 4.5% didn't feel they belonged at all. Students in the mixed community college expressed the highest level of belonging (81.1%), compared with 63.6% of students in the all-boys school and 57.9% of students in the all-girls school. Only one student in the mixed community college said they felt they did not belong at all, compared with 4.3% in the all-boys school and 3.9% in the all-girls school.

39.9% of all students said they felt very safe in their school, 49.8% said they felt quite safe, 9.6% sometimes felt unsafe and only one student in each school (or 0.7%) felt very unsafe. Students in the mixed community college felt the safest (68.3% very safe and 27.7% quite safe), while only 41.8% of students in the all-girls school and 20.7% of students in the all-boys school felt very safe. Students in the all-boys school were also most likely to feel sometimes unsafe (16.5%) compared with 3% of the mixed community college students and 6.5% of the all-girls school students.

By far the most important factor in feeling safe is having good friends at school. 81.1% of participants cited this as a reason, followed by having supportive teachers (50.5%) and the fact that bullying is not tolerated by the school (42.1%). Initiatives taken by the school to encourage friendship were seen as more important by students from the all-girls school (16.3%) than by students from the mixed community college (10.3%) or the all-boys school (8.6%).

The most common reason students gave for feeling 'quite unsafe' or 'sometimes unsafe' was body size/type (21 participants overall). This was followed by 'How well you do in school' (15 participants) and cultural background (14 participants). Students from the all-boys schools most frequently cited body size/type (10 students) and cultural background (11 students) as reasons for feeling unsafe. Only 9 participants overall cited sexual orientation as a reason for feeling unsafe. In the month prior to the survey, 19 students overall said they had missed a day in school because of feeling unsafe, while 8 said they had missed 6 or more days.

Bullying

In the year prior to completing the survey, 32.8% of all participants said they had been called hurtful names or threatened at school. This was considerably more prevalent in the all-boys school (48.5%) than in the all-girls school (22.4%) or the mixed community college (23.8%). Perhaps most surprisingly, in all three schools, this was rarely to do with sexual orientation, gender or disability and most frequently attributed to body type/size. The second most cited reason in the all-boys school was cultural background / ethnicity.

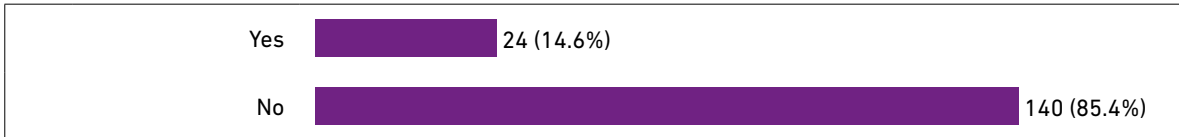
Overall, students reported low rates of physical bullying or sexual harassment. Again, however, physical harassment was considerably more prevalent in the all-boys school and least frequent in the all-girls school.

All-boys school

18 In the past year, have you ever been physically pushed or shoved at your school?

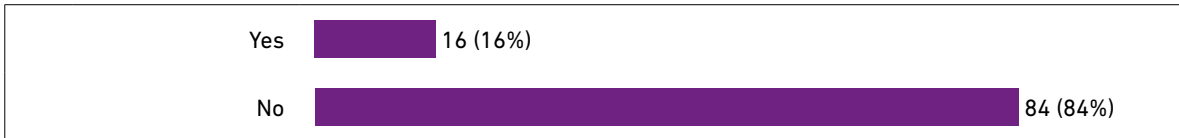


19 In the past year, have you ever been physically bullied (punched, kicked, injured with a weapon, etc.) at your school?



Mixed community college

18 In the past year, have you ever been physically pushed or shoved at your school?

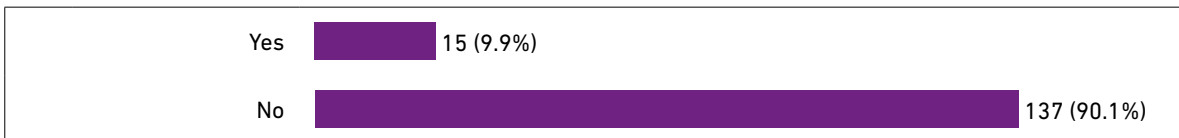


19 In the past year, have you ever been physically bullied (punched, kicked, injured with a weapon, etc.) at your school?



All-girls school

18 In the past year, have you ever been physically pushed or shoved at your school?



19 In the past year, have you ever been physically bullied (punched, kicked, injured with a weapon, etc.) at your school?



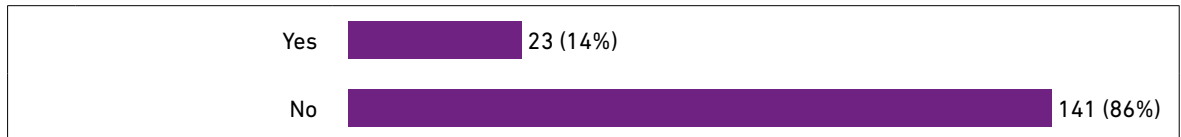
30.9% of students in the all-girls school reported having had mean rumors or lies spread about them by students at their school, compared with 28.7% of students in the all-boys school and 22.4% of students in the mixed school. Body type was the most frequently cited reason for this.

47% of students in the all-girls school said they had felt excluded or 'left out' on purpose by other students, compared with 27.8% of students in the all-boys school and 22.2% of students in the mixed school. Again body type was the most frequently cited reason for this type of bullying.

All-boys school

24

In the past year, have you ever been upset or threatened by students at your school using phone or internet communications (for example, text messages, emails, instant messages (IM), or postings on Twitter, Tumblr or Facebook)?



Mixed community college

24

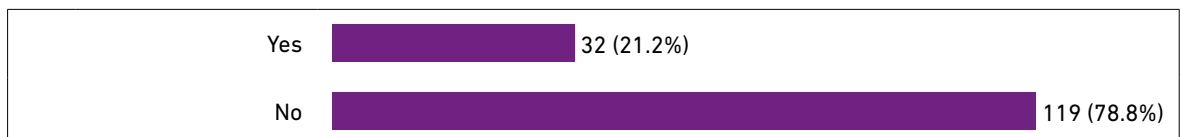
In the past year, have you ever been upset or threatened by students at your school using phone or internet communications (for example, text messages, emails, instant messages (IM), or postings on Twitter, Tumblr or Facebook)?



All-girls school

24

In the past year, have you ever been upset or threatened by students at your school using phone or internet communications (for example, text messages, emails, instant messages (IM), or postings on Twitter, Tumblr or Facebook)?



Reporting bullying

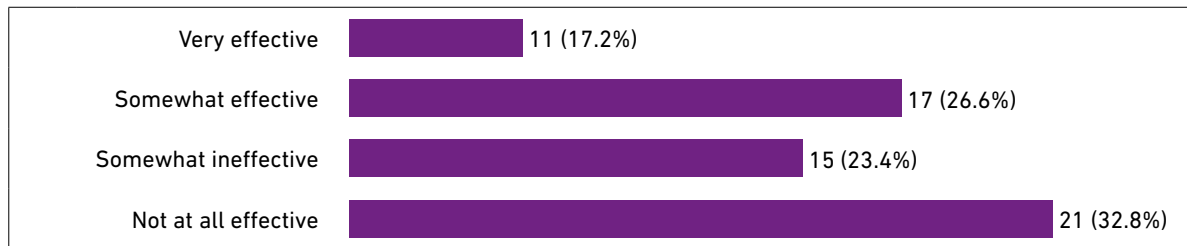
When asked 'If you were bullied or harassed in school, did you report this to a teacher or other staff member?', only 8.1% of participants responded 'always'. 5.5% said most of the time, 14.6% said some of the time and 25.8% said never. Students in the all-girls school were least likely to always report and most likely never to report.

The main reasons given for not reporting were the incident was not serious enough to report, reporting might make things worse, nothing would be done about it (the teachers don't care) or the bullied student did not want to be a 'rat' or 'snitch'. How different teachers handle bullying was also considered to be a factor in whether or not students were likely to report incidents.

Students in the all-girls school were the most critical of teachers' effectiveness in addressing problems that were reported:

All-girls school

27 Overall, how effective was the staff response in addressing the problem the last time you reported it?



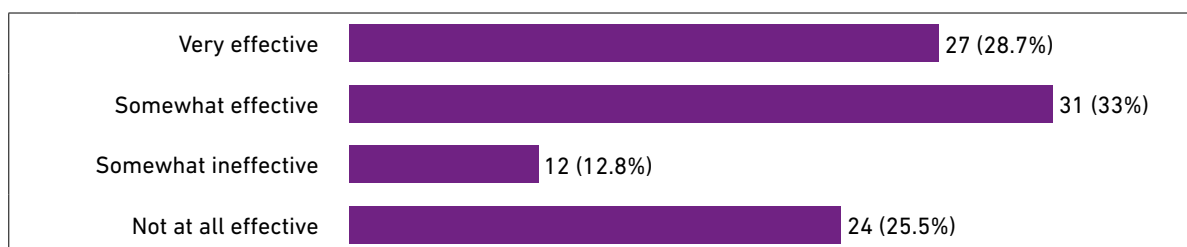
Mixed community college

27 Overall, how effective was the staff response in addressing the problem the last time you reported it?



All-boys school

27 Overall, how effective was the staff response in addressing the problem the last time you reported it?



Inclusivity climate

In addition to their own personal experiences of bullying and exclusion, students were asked about the type and frequency of negative remarks that they heard in school, with a view to gaining a sense of the broader school climate. They were also asked whether they heard or were taught about certain issues in a positive way, and what other positive interventions they were aware of.

Have you ever heard any of the following negative remarks at school (all participants)?

	Frequently / often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Racist remarks	22.1%	25.5%	23.8%	28.6%
Sexist remarks	19.9%	27.5%	19.6%	33.2%
'Gay' used in a pejorative way	49.5%	27.9%	13%	9.5%
Other comments about LGB people	23.3%	37.8%	30.3%	23.5%
Negative remarks about transgender people	7.3%	13%	25.6%	54.1%
Negative remarks about other students' mental or physical ability	21.1%	26.6%	26.1%	26.1%
Negative remarks about other students' religion	12.7%	11.2%	27.5%	48.5%
Negative remarks about other students' size or body weight	32.9%	26.7%	23.2%	17.2%

Again responses to this question revealed significant disparities between schools. Racist remarks were heard most often in the all-boys school (frequently by 41%, sometimes by 37.5% and never by 9%) and were least common in the all-girls school, where only 3.2% reported hearing them frequently, 7.3% sometimes and a remarkable 58.5% never. In the mixed community college, racist remarks were frequently heard by 17.8%, sometimes heard by 31.1% and never heard by 18.9%. The significant disparity between the girls school and the other two schools in this regard cannot be attributed solely to its mono-ethnicity since participants from both the girls school and the mixed community college were 87% white Irish (compared with 63% of participants in the all-boys school).

The prevalence of sexist remarks was spread more evenly, with 39.3% of participants in the all-boys school and 38.8% of participants in the all-girls school reporting that they never heard sexist remarks, compared with 16% of participants in the mixed community college. A higher percentage of participants in the mixed community college also reported hearing sexist remarks frequently (29%), compared with 22% in the all-boys school and 19.1% in the all-girls school. The greater prevalence of sexist remarks in the mixed school may be attributable to competitive discourse or 'banter' between boys and girls and/or to comments arising from discussions about sexual attraction.

While common across the board, pejorative use of the word 'gay' was by far the most prevalent in the all-boys school, where 89.4% of participants reported hearing it frequently, compared with 49.5% in the mixed school and 36% in the all-girls school. Similarly, a higher percentage of participants from the all-boys school reported frequently hearing other negative comments about gay, lesbian, or bisexual people (35.7%), compared with 24% of the mixed school students and only 10.2% of the all-girls students. Notwithstanding the distinction between homophobia and homophobic bullying, this is consistent with O'Higgins Norman (2009), who found that homophobic bullying was significantly more prevalent in boys' single-sex (94%) and co-educational schools (82%) in Ireland, with teachers in girls' single-sex schools the least likely (55%) to report homophobic bullying. Negative remarks about transgender people were uncommon but again were more prevalent in the all-boys school (10.6% reported hearing them frequently) and the mixed school (10%) than in the all-girls school (2%).

32.1% of participants in the all-boys school reported frequently hearing negative remarks about other students' mental or physical ability, compared with 18% in the mixed school and 12.1% in the all-girls school. However, more participants in the all-girls school said they sometimes heard such comments (30.9%) than in the all-boys school (23.5%) or mixed school (25%).

Hearing negative remarks about other students' religions was significantly more common in the all-boys school. 25.5% of participants said this occurred frequently and 19.6% sometimes, compared with 8.1% (frequently) and 10.1% (sometimes) in the mixed school and 2.7% (frequently) and 3.4% (sometimes) in the all-girls school. The low incidence of such remarks in the girls school may be explained by the fact that it is the most mono-religious, with 82.6% of participants declaring themselves Roman Catholic, 10.1% no religion and 7.4% other faiths. The all-boys school had more participants from other faiths (26.1%) than the mixed school (19.4%) but it also had fewer Roman Catholic participants (46.1%) than the mixed school (68%) and more students who professed to have no religion (27.9%) than the mixed school (12.6%).

Negative remarks about other students' size or body weight were again most common in the all-boys school, with 41.2% of participants saying they heard them frequently and 26.1% sometimes, compared with 27.3% (frequently) and 27.3% (sometimes) in the mixed school and 28.2% (frequently) and 26.8% (sometimes) in the all-girls school.

All participants most frequently identified 'some of the students' or 'a few of the students' as being responsible for these remarks. The exception was negative use of the word gay, where 35.9% of participants in the boys school said that 'most of the students' made these remarks (compared to 18.8% in the mixed school and 15.2% in the all-girls school).

Teachers and staff

Participants were also asked about the frequency with which they heard negative remarks from teachers or school staff. Only 3.7% of participants said they frequently heard racist remarks from teachers or school staff, with 5.2% saying this sometimes happened. 5.4% of participants said they frequently heard sexist remarks from teachers or school staff, while 10.7% said this was sometimes the case. The incidence of students hearing sexist remarks from teachers was highest in the mixed school (8% frequently and 18.8% sometimes), whose participants also reported hearing sexist remarks most frequently from other students. Teachers were rarely heard using the word gay in a pejorative way (5.2% of all participants said they heard this frequently, with 8.3% in the all-boys school saying this was the case, while 3.9% of participants said they sometimes heard it). Negative comments from teachers about gay, lesbian, or bisexual people were extremely rare in all schools (2.9% of participants said they frequently heard such comments), as were negative comments about transgender people (also frequently heard by only 2.9%). Negative comments by teachers about students' mental or physical ability were somewhat more common, with 6.8% of participants reporting that they heard these frequently and 5% sometimes. The incidence of teachers making negative comments about other people's religion was extremely rare (2.3% of participants said this happened often and 2% sometimes). Negative comments about students' size or body weight were also relatively rare (5.5% said they heard them frequently and 3.4% sometimes).

Participants were also asked how often the teacher or staff member, if present, intervened or did something about different types of negative remarks made by students. In the case of racist remarks, 16.7% of participants said teachers never intervened, while 12.8% said they always intervened (11.2% said they intervened most of the time, 17.3% some of the time). In the case of sexist remarks, 22% of participants said that teachers never intervened, while only 6.6% said they always intervened (10.2% said most of the time and 17.1% said some of the time). These relatively low levels of intervention on the part of teachers were fairly consistent across all categories of remarks, although they are partly attributable to the fact that the teacher was often not present when such remarks were made.

Student intervention / bystanders

Much lower levels of student intervention were reported. In the case of racist remarks, 29% of participants said that other students never intervened, 35.5% said they sometimes did, 8% said this happened most of the time, while only 4% said that it always happened. Students were least likely to intervene in response to racist remarks in the all-boys schools, where 45.7% of participants reported that this never happened. The frequency of all types of negative remarks was lowest in the all-girls school.

In relation to sexist remarks, 32.8% of participants said other students never intervened. Again this was by far the highest in the all-boys school, where participants reported a 53.3% rate of students never intervening in the case of sexist comments and a 1.3% rate of always intervening (4% most of the time, 26% some of the time). By contrast, in the mixed school (8.1% of participants said that students always intervened, 20.2% most of the time, 39.4% some of the time and 20.2% never. In the all-girls school, 7.3% of participants said students always intervened, 11.3% most of the time, 28.7% some of the time and 20.7% never.

Student intervention was least likely in the case of negative use of the word gay, with 46.2% of participants saying that other students never intervened in this case. Again this figure was much higher in the all-boys school where 59.9% of participants said other students never intervened and only 2.6% said this always happened. Generally, low levels of student intervention were reported in response to all types of remarks, although students in the all-girls school were most likely to intervene in the case of negative remarks about other students' size or body weight (7.4% said this always happened, 18.8% most of the time and 29.5% some of the time).

Positive school-climate interventions

Students in the all-girls school displayed the highest awareness of the school's anti-bullying programme (65.6% said their school had one, 27.8% didn't know / weren't sure). In the mixed school, 57.4% of participants said their school had an anti-bullying programme, while 32.7% didn't know / weren't sure and in the all-boys school, 56.2% were aware of the school's anti-bullying programme, while 29% didn't know / weren't sure.

When asked whether they had been taught positive things about lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) people, history or events in any of their classes in the previous year, 75.3% of the all-boys, 49.5% of the mixed and 49.7% of the all-girls participants said yes. However, a higher percentage of participants in the all-boys school (14.5%) also reported having been taught negative things about LGBT people, history, or events, compared with 2% in the mixed school and 2% in the all-girls school. This is a surprising finding, considering that participants from the all-boys school reported the lowest provision of information about supports for LGBT young people and the lowest visibility of diversity resources on walls and noticeboards.

On the whole, teachers in the mixed school were seen as being the most supportive of LGBT students, with 47.5% of participants reporting that more than 10 teachers were LGBT-supportive, compared with 40.4% in the all-boys school and 30.3% in the all-girls school. The percentage of participants who didn't know if their teachers were LGBT-supportive was highest in the girls school (59.2%) and lowest in the all-boys school (32.9%) with 44.6% in the mixed school reporting that they didn't know.

Only 7.5% of participants in the all-boys school felt that their school was very accepting of LGBT people, compared with 38.6% in the mixed school and 19.1% in the all-girls school. 21.7% of participants in the all-boys school felt their school was somewhat accepting, compared with 33.7% in the mixed school and 44.1% in the all-girls school. The all-boys school also reported the highest percentage of 'not very accepting' (15.5%) and 'not at all accepting' (7.5%), compared with 1% and 2% in the mixed school and 7.9% and 2% in the all-girls school. By far the highest percentage of participants in the mixed school (69.3%) felt that their school administration (principal, vice principal, etc.) was very supportive of LGBT students, compared with 37.7% in the all-boys school and 15.8% in the all-girls school.

When asked what could be done to improve LGBT inclusivity, several participants made concrete suggestions such as establishing an LGBT club or society, inviting more speakers in to give talks and making more resources available to students. The students in the mixed school generally had the most concrete proposals, many of which were geared toward mainstreaming and reforming the curricula:

'adjust the sphe programme. we dont learn about gay relationships, only straight relationships. when ever we learn about sex its always between a man and a woman. we need more information in schools on this kind of topic for lgbt student.'

There was a strong sense in the all-girls' school that, in spite of initiatives such as posters and the Thumbs up for Diversity event, talking openly about sexuality was a taboo subject, and that the students had a keen desire to break this taboo: nearly all of the participants' responses contained a reference to talking, being more open and raising awareness. Several students also offered quite lengthy and considered responses:


'I would like the heteronormativity to be challenged so straight isn't seen as the default when teachers are speaking about relationships casually. I would like to be taught more about the risks that are involved with lgbt+ and the stigma surrounding the community for topics like aids or romantic expression in public.'

Conclusions

This pilot study suggests that teachers and students are very positive about initiatives seeking student opinions about their experiences of school life. Participants reported relatively low levels of physical bullying or sexual harassment. Surprisingly, the main factor in other types of bullying (being called hurtful names, having mean rumours spread about you, being excluded) in all three schools was body shape/size. Teachers were surprised by this finding and were inclined to attribute it to increased image awareness created by social media. While these findings are not generalisable, they suggest that further research needs to be done in this area. Feedback from teachers and principals indicates that schools need broader instruments that can evaluate the diversity climate more generally, taking into account a range of issues (gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, body image, religion, etc.). In response to this feedback, the Anti-Bullying Centre has secured funding from the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission to build a general survey tool that generates immediate results for teachers. This is now available at <https://inclusivity.ie>. That students reported low levels of intervention in the case of students making negative remarks about other students (on the basis of gender, sexuality, body size, ethnicity, disability, etc.) indicates that there is work to be done in schools on fostering a climate in which verbal bullying is not tolerated. Pro-actively supporting an all-school culture of inclusivity appears to have a positive result on the school's inclusivity performance. However, more research is needed, which compares schools of the same type (e.g. single-sex) but with different levels of commitment to inclusivity in order to establish this more clearly.

References

O'Higgins Norman, J., Harrison, K., and Goldrick, M. (2010). Addressing Homophobic Bullying in Second-Level Schools. Dublin, The Equality Authority.

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