Are LGBT schools the solution to homophobic bullying in Britain’s Schools?

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Abstract

According to a report by the charity Stonewall in 2012, over half of gay, lesbian and bisexual young people face homophobic bullying in school. After two decades of progress for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights, and increasing support from successive UK governments (with measures such as the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act of 2013), one might take from this that schools are getting left behind a more general societal trend. Schools are frequently tasked with educating young people about living peaceably in society and accepting the diversity of our twenty-first century nation. Yet, though homophobia might be mistakenly assumed to be something that is fading away among the millennial generation, the evidence does not bear this out. This article revisits plans made in 2015 for Britain’s first LGBT school as a possible solution to homophobic, biphobic and transphobic (HBT) bullying and discrimination, and considers whether such an idea should be considered at a UK government level.

Keywords: HBT bullying; LGBT schools; homophobia; separate schooling.
Almost two years ago, a plan to educate LGBT young people in an LGBT school to save them from discrimination and benefit their physical and mental wellbeing was reported relatively widely in the British media. However, with the steady progression of LGBT rights in the twenty-first century many, including myself, dismissed the idea out of hand. Yet, in the summer of 2016 the UK government announced that it was to treble funding to tackle HBT bullying in schools, a measure that suggests that perhaps it was narrow-minded to dismiss more radical options so lightly (Camden, 2016).

In mid-January 2015, British newspapers were briefly alight with stories of a plan for a new state school in Manchester that would cater specifically for LGBT pupils. The Guardian reported that the school could open within three years and would aim to take 40 full-time and 20 part-time students from across the region. The strategic director for LGBT Youth North West (the charity behind the project), Amelia Lee, claimed that the aim was not to create ‘a little, safe enclave away from the real work,’ but that an LGBT school would be something of a temporary expedient while the UK’s education system reached towards the somewhat distant reality of true inclusion for LGBT young people (Hill, 2015a). Indeed, Lee argued that such a project was potentially life-saving, as British schools were currently failing to deal with issues of sexuality effectively.

Although Lee claimed that the proposed school was to be LGBT-inclusive, not exclusive, the very proposal raised an interesting debate over the role of “segregated” schooling nonetheless. For commentator Deborah Orr (2015), the very acceptance of the need for such a school seemed to signal the failure of comprehensive education and she suggested that it was a mark of ‘leftist hypocrisy’ that such an exception to the comprehensive idea
was even countenanced. However, Orr went on to conclude that perhaps the LGBT school idea is simply ‘a practical response to and for people who feel denigrated simply because of who they are to themselves’. The Rt. Rev David Walker, the Bishop of Manchester, also seemed to offer qualified support for the project to save students from homophobic bullying (Dobson, 2015a). Nevertheless, even such tentative support appeared to be the minority opinion on the potential of such a project.

On the more critical side, Conservative MP Tim Loughton suggested that such a scheme would create segregation, remarking, ‘I cannot see how segregating a group of young people identified by their sexuality can aid better engagement and understanding’ (Walton, 2015). Loughton found a supporting voice from Manchester city councillor Sheila Newman and from the LGBT pressure group Stonewall, whose chief executive, Ruth Hunt, suggested that LGBT-only schools were not the answer, but instead that more effort should be made to create safe and inclusive environments in Britain’s existing schools (Walton, 2015, Hill, 2015b). Similar ideas were echoed by UKIP education spokesman Paul Nuttall, who argued that it was ‘utterly bizarre to be taking a step that highlights differences and adds nothing of value to a child’s education’ (Doyle & Tozer, 2015). Indeed, within days of the initial story, the Manchester Evening News was reporting that a petition had been set up to oppose the idea, with its creator suggesting that such a school would ‘damage our [LGBT] equality’ (Dobson, 2015b).

Of course, between tentative support and outright condemnation, there were those in the media who found it hard to come down on one side or the other. Eleanor Margolis of the New Statesman expressed her personal difficulty with the idea: her initial reaction being that
the idea was ‘ghettoisation at its worst,’ but upon further contemplation, perhaps it was unfair that ‘today’s LGBT kids have to put up with homophobic bullying in the name of progress’ – by the end of her article she confessed to being firmly on the fence (Margolis, 2015). Almost two years on, and the Manchester proposal has disappeared off the radar – having been shelved for the foreseeable future. Yet, the questions the debate raised still remain.

Many news pieces likened the touted idea of an LGBT school to the already established Harvey Milk High School (HMHS) in New York City, set up as a private institution in 1985. Indeed, much the same debates happened over a decade ago in the US when the school achieved official “state school” status in 2002. The New York Times, though sympathetic to the HMHS’s aims of improving the lives of LGBT young people facing discrimination in mainstream schools, decided that they could not ‘condone’ the establishment of the school at the time. Their line was firmly that segregation was not the solution to discrimination, but rather a short-term fix where a longer-term one was required (Opinion, NYT, 2003).

An academic study the following year pointed to several criticisms of the HMHS idea: the suggestion that separation is preferable to promoting tolerance; that such a school opened the door to a whole host of other minority schools; and, that such institutions do not make socioeconomic sense (Harris & Dyson, 2004). However, as the authors of this study also note, there is ample suggestion that students who face discrimination in mainstream schooling are already facing a different educational experience, one interwoven with fear of physical and mental bullying. The study also notes that the statistics did bear out that LGBT young people (at least a decade or so ago) were far more likely to drop out of school, suffer from depression, and commit suicide. Most apparent of all was that 97% of students in
public [state] schools reported hearing homophobic comments from peers, and from an even more disturbing 53% of staff (Harris & Dyson, 2004). Obviously times have moved on, and HMHS is still around, but the fundamental issue, whether separation/segregation is ever right, remains the crux of the debate.

Of course, in Britain, separate or “segregated” schools already exist within the state and private sectors, and most of these schools claim that their particular “group” benefits from its particular form of separateness. Britain has long allowed for faith-based and single-sex schools, as well as schools for a variety of special educational needs (SEN). The arguments in favour of single-sex schools are often based around learning styles, and even brain differences – resulting in improved academic achievement (Crawford-Ferr & Wiest, 2013). Faith schools are often – at least anecdotally – seen as producing better discipline and results, but as Clement (2010) details, this might well not be entirely accurate. Finally, studies such as Whittaker (2001) suggest that SEN schools, essential in the eyes of those who feel mainstream schools are unable to cater for their child adequately, are also potentially damaging to both differently-abled children and their communities. Segregation/separation, it seems, cannot be simply dismissed as right or wrong – it is a case too complex for a catchall answer.

Yet, an answer is needed. In 2012, a University of Cambridge study (commissioned by Stonewall) showed that 55% of lesbian, bi or gay students experienced homophobic bullying in secondary schools, that 3 in 5 gay pupils who experience HBT bullying say the teachers that witness it do not intervene, and that 96% of LGBT pupil hear homophobic remarks used in school (Stonewall, 2012). Another 2014 study by Stonewall revealed that
nine in ten secondary teachers have witnessed bullying of LGBT (or perceived to be LGBT) students. Clearly there is a problem here, and it is not just the students who are proving to be a part of it. Perhaps a reason for this, as Stonewall also notes, is that 80% of secondary teachers have not received training on how to tackle homophobic bullying. As a result, Stonewall offer “Train the Teacher” courses to enable knowledge about tackling HBT bullying to be rolled out across the UK (Stonewall, 2016). Perhaps, such training and support networks within existing schools can, if properly funded and supported by the government, prevent the need for separation of LGBT students from others.

Training teachers about tackling HBT bullying is surely a sensible start, but it is only one of a variety of strategies that have emerged in recent years. Among the alternative or complementary options touted are: gay role models, be they staff (Skinner 2015; see also, http://www.outteacher.org) or ex-pupils (Ramsey 2016), teaching LGBT History (Niemtus 2016), or the primarily US-based initiative of forming gay-straight alliances within schools (Heck et al. 2011). Stonewall’s 2012 “School Report” report outlines ten measures, incorporating ideas similar to those above, and combining them with more straightforward moves such as clarifying school policy and acting quickly to instances of HBT bullying (Stonewall, 2012). For a more detailed list of the existing research into effective initiatives and interventions to combat HBT bullying, it is well worth consulting Mitchell et al. (2014), a report commissioned by the then coalition UK government. On balance, developing some, or all, of these options would be vastly preferable to the extreme and perhaps counterproductive step of separation in the case of LGBT youth.
It is encouraging that in 2016 the Conservative government has backed £3 million of funding to tackle the problem of HBT bullying, trebling the amount set out earlier that same year – but it also suggests the problem is far from solved (Camden, 2016). HBT bullying and discrimination is still a real issue, it affects students on a daily basis and in many cases there are still no systems of support in place to stop it. Nevertheless, even upon reconsideration, there is little evidence to suggest that separation is the solution. Instead, the UK government should continue to back a variety of strategies to tackle the problem, particularly in secondary schools, so that the millennial generation becomes the last generation where HBT bullying is a daily presence in the UK education system.

References


