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The limitations of focussing on homophobic, biphobic and transphobic 'bullying' to understand and address LGBT young people's experiences within and beyond school

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Abstract

This paper presents new empirical data that highlights how a focus on 'bullying' is too limited and narrow when thinking about homophobia, biphobia and transphobia that young people may experience. The paper draws on two recent studies with young lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans participants, which each identified issues and experiences not readily captured within dominant bullying discourses and understandings. Findings are examined within three sections: beyond 'bullying', questioning inevitability, and (in)appropriate responses. In conclusion, I set out some implications and suggestions for the development of practice and future research concerning homophobia, biphobia and transphobia in youth settings.

Keywords: bullying, LGBT, risk, victim, youth

Introduction

This paper presents new empirical data from studies with/about lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans[1] (LGBT) young people that highlight the limitations of a narrow focus on 'bullying' when thinking about homophobic, biphobic and transphobic prejudice and discrimination. This is not to suggest that some young people do not have negative experiences, or that these experiences do not matter. Nor is the intention to dismiss existing evidence on the prevalence or impact of bullying. Rather, I argue that issues can be overlooked or misunderstood when bullying is the focus of attention within schools and broader advocacy work. This was evident in two recent studies which identified issues and experiences not readily captured within understandings based on a bullying 'discourse' or 'lens' (Walton, 2011). Building on critical debates in the field of bullying scholarship (outlined below), the original contribution of this paper is to show how the 'dominance' of bullying discourses (Payne and Smith, 2013) manifests in practice settings, and how this can impact (negatively) on the lives of LGBT[2] youth. The paper therefore offers insights from young people, who less often feature in critiques of (homophobic or transphobic) bullying in existing literature.

The paper will contextualise my arguments through an overview of existing literature, before outlining findings from the studies on which the paper draws and setting out implications for future responses to homophobic, biphobic and transphobic prejudice and discrimination in youth settings, as well as future research in the field. This paper is not simply a report of the research studies (which appears elsewhere), but uses this research to support and extend previous work that critiques the concept of 'bullying'.

Research context

Over the last fifteen years, research has documented the existence of homophobic bullying, primarily in the UK and USA (e.g. Espelage et al, 2008; Formby, 2013; Rivers and Cowie, 2006). Recent large-scale research suggested that 55% of LGB youth experience homophobic bullying at some point in UK secondary schools and colleges (Guasp, 2012). Evidence of transphobic bullying is scarcer, but nevertheless exists (Jones and Hillier, 2013; Tippett et al, 2010). Studies have also demonstrated the potential impact of bullying on young LGBT people's mental health and emotional wellbeing, including self-harm, depression and/or attempted suicide (McNamee et al, 2008; Robinson and Espelage, 2011), as well as the impact upon school attendance or engagement (Jones and Hillier, 2013; Rivers, 2000), and subsequently educational attainment and potential for employment and promotion opportunities (Formby, 2014a).

This interest in bullying is also reflected in policy, guidance and advocacy work. In England, there are references to prejudice-based bullying in government documentation

[1] I use trans as a shorthand umbrella term for someone whose gender identity differs from how they were assigned at birth, e.g. they may identify as bigender, gender fluid, genderless, genderqueer, intersex, transgender or transsexual. The term therefore includes a range of gender identities and embodied experiences.

[2] Although recognising that combining complex issues and potentially fluid sexual and gender identities can be problematic (Formby, 2012), much UK policy, practice and research does so. I also include LGBT as a combined acronym within this paper, but for clarity care has been taken throughout to use the specific acronyms of LGB or LGBT where appropriate when discussing literature or data. When discussing Study 1, for example, I refer to LGB rather than LGBT participants (because no-one identified as trans within the study), although individual participants might have referred to LGBT issues or people in their comments.

(DfE, 2014; Ofsted, 2013), and the government has recently allocated two million pounds to combat homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying. Internationally, the US Department of Education has hosted bullying summits (Payne and Smith, 2013), and homophobic bullying has also been addressed by UNESCO (2012), the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (Takacs, 2006), and the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA, 2013).

However, more recently a growing body of work has developed which suggests the need for caution about over-stating these 'risks' and portraying (young) LGBT people as inherent 'victims'. As Cover notes (2012: 3), 'the 'vulnerabilisation' of queer youth is not uncommon in research on queer sexuality'. It has also been suggested that some (school) settings reinforce an 'at risk' agenda dubbed the 'martyr-target-victim syndrome' (Rofes, 2004) and the 'deficit model' (Quinlivan, 2002). This may be influenced by historical discourses of LGB identities as forms of mental illness (Clarke, 1996; Ferfolja, 2009). As Ellis (2007: 19-20) argued, 'those who identify/are identified as different are positioned as patients, victims, sufferers, or as being somehow 'at risk''. Youdell (2004), Airton (2013), and Rasmussen and Crowley (2004: 428-9) have also noted the common portrayal of LGBT/queer identities as 'wounded' or 'suffering', which 'deflect[s] research and pedagogy away from a consideration of the operations of heteronormativity in schooling towards a focus on individual/group pathology'.

Bryan and Mayock (2012: 12), based on their study of mental health and wellbeing among LGBT people in Ireland, question 'the accuracy of popular constructions of LGBT lives as uniformly wounded and vulnerable'. This quote alludes to an acknowledgment of the intersectionality of experiences of being LGBT (e.g. related to different abilities, ethnic backgrounds/identities, social classes, etc). Bryan and Mayock (2012), and Jones and Hillier (2013), have also stressed the place of resilience in young LGBT people's lives, although the concept of resiliency has been criticised for overly focussing on the self-determination of gay youth (Waidzunas, 2012). Rasmussen (2006) has suggested that in the long-term discourses of 'risk' may have a distancing or numbing effect, preventing practitioners from understanding their own potential role in contributing to heteronormative school environments. Macintosh (2007), for example, has pointed to a curriculum that frequently reproduces heterosexuality as 'normal' and homosexuality as 'other'. Equally, presenting LGBT youth as inherently in need of protection continues to mark them out as fundamentally different from their heterosexual and/or cisgendered peers, which may not be helpful in the long-term (Airton, 2013; Rasmussen, 2006). Payne and Smith (2013) have highlighted the overwhelming prevalence of bullying discourses, which produce a clear binary between 'victim' in need of protection and vilified 'bully', and which neglect the powerful influence of institutional heteronormativity. As Ringrose and Renold (2010: 574) argue, 'the hegemonic bully/victim binary operates to simplify and individualise complex social and cultural phenomena'.

In a critique of the It Gets Better[3] campaign (which may feed into assumptions about the inevitability of LGBT youth experiencing bullying), Harris and Farrington (2014) have highlighted the ways in which the project presents a 'happiness discourse' which does not acknowledge that it might not 'get better' for everyone, and therefore might minimise people's ability to later articulate and seek support for their unhappiness. Grzanka and

[3] It Gets Better is an online project founded in the United States in 2010 in response to high-profile (gay, or assumed gay) teen suicides. Videos are posted on the project website and You Tube channel by celebrities and others.

Mann (2014: 376) have also suggested that the campaign puts the responsibility of 'getting better' onto individual queer youth, rather than examining 'structural dynamics of sexuality- and gender-based inequality'. Recognising the importance of intersectionality, they, amongst others, have emphasised that it is more likely to 'get better' if people are white and middle-class, thereby acknowledging the uneven nature of bullying experiences and outcomes (Grzanka and Mann, 2014). This perspective reflects a growing body of work that critiques individualising and psychologising approaches to bullying research and which instead advocate a sociological approach (Pascoe, 2013; Payne and Smith, 2013).

Stanko and Curry (1997) have suggested that highlighting violence or discrimination can be an activist strategy to try and seek change, exemplified in much of Stonewall's[4] published research on homophobic bullying. As a result, it has been argued (McCormack, 2012) that anti-bullying campaigns can increase young people's fears about coming out (though it could also be argued that anti-bullying campaigns engender greater visibility and/or support, which facilitates young people's coming out). Waidzunas (2012: 203) has also explored activist use of gay suicide estimates that may contribute to 'the homogenisation of the identity category 'gay youth' as universally denoting people at risk of suicide'. In seeking to challenge earlier/medical pathologising discourses, gay activism may have thus facilitated further/different (re)pathologising discourses about the 'risks' of gay youth suicidality (Waidzunas, 2012). Dominant bullying and/or suicidal discourses about LGBT young people can therefore contribute to one-dimensional understandings of LGBT lives as only/either 'suffering' or 'resilient' (Airton, 2013; Waidzunas, 2012). This paper draws on these ideas, and using research findings, argues that these wider discourses and strategies influence and limit the potential for schools, and wider society, to fully address the potential (uneven) impact of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia in young people's lives.

Research methods

Like some of the above literature, the research projects on which this paper draws are informed by sociological understanding. I therefore look at the wider contexts for experiences of bullying, prejudice or discrimination, rather than taking a more psychological approach and examining only the individuals concerned. Here, I briefly outline the focus and methods of each study, both of which received approval from Sheffield Hallam University Research Ethics Committee.

Study 1 took place in 2011 within a Northern county of England, with participants primarily drawn from one city and one town within the region. The research explored perceived barriers and facilitators to school and youth work staff addressing issues about (homo)sexuality, homophobia[5], (trans)gender identities and/or transphobia within their practice, from a range of perspectives: young people aged 11-21, teachers, and youth

[4] Stonewall is the UK's leading LGB charity. In February 2015 it announced it was extending its remit to also campaign for trans equality.

[5] Homophobia and transphobia were the words used by participants to denote prejudice towards LGBT individuals/groups. Whilst some identified as bisexual, biphobia was not a term used by participants. Instead, they talked about homophobia targeted at LGB people, and transphobia targeted at trans people. For this reason, in this paper I use only homophobia and transphobia when discussing participant responses, but refer to biphobia when making broader arguments. I use homophobia and transphobia as shorthand for opposition to LGBT identities that is embedded within social contexts, rather than individualised phenomena.

workers[6]. Though youth workers and non-school settings featured in this research, participants' focus often remained on (recent) school-based experiences. The study employed a two-stage methodology. First, a self-completion survey of young people was electronically advertised and physically distributed via schools, youth services[7] and other local authority, National Health Service and voluntary sector contacts. Participants could respond online via a secure website or use freepost return envelopes. The questionnaire (to which there were 146 responses) primarily consisted of closed questions, though there were a small number of open questions. Survey data provided an overview of current practice regarding the inclusion/exclusion of issues about (homo)sexuality and/or (trans)gender identity in local schools and youth services, and was used to inform the subsequent in-depth stage in a sample of community settings.

The second stage of work involved individual semi-structured interviews with five youth workers and four teachers with a responsibility for personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) and/or LGBT 'issues', and eight focus groups with young people in a range of settings (65 young people in total). Table 1 provides a breakdown of these settings and participants (for more detailed description see Formby, 2013). Broad topic areas explored included curriculum content and delivery; understandings of prejudice and/or bullying; professional responses and related issues; available services, and suggestions for how things could/should be different. These areas were chosen to address the overall research question, i.e. how and why formal and informal curricula/settings did, or did not, include issues about sexuality and/or gender identity, and the potential impact for LGBT youth. Face-to-face participants were drawn from nine fieldwork sites: three secondary schools, three area-based youth services (i.e. generic youth provision), and three LGBT-specific youth services (although no trans-identified young people were accessing the LGBT services at the time of the research, hence no trans young people participated within Study 1).

[Table 1 here]

Following on from Study 1, Study 2 (reported in full in Formby, 2014b) took place in 2013 and was conducted in one Northern town in England (in the same county as Study 1, and involving some of the same staff/settings). Influenced by the lack of trans participants in the previous study, it specifically explored awareness and support needs around young (trans)gender identities within the area from three different perspectives: young people, parents of trans young people, and staff working with (not only trans) young people. Topic areas covered with young people and parents were: knowledge and awareness; 'bullying', prejudice and discrimination; accessing information, support or advice. With staff they were: knowledge and awareness; professional practice and responses to 'bullying', prejudice and discrimination; support and training needs. The first stage of the research utilised two (secure) online self-completion surveys to elicit contextual information on current levels of awareness and/or practice in the field of supporting trans young people,

[6] A youth worker is a staff member that works in or provides a youth service. They may not necessarily be a young person themselves.

[7] In the UK, youth services/groups provide activities and events, social networking, informal education, individual advice or support, and/or facilities such as pool table(s), television and video game equipment. They may be run by local government, or a voluntary sector service/charity. LGBT-specific youth services also provide this range of activities, and should not necessarily be viewed as (only) a 'support' service.

and familiarity with gender identity more broadly. The first was targeted at young people, whether or not they self-identified as trans, resulting in 37 respondents. The second survey was targeted at staff working in youth settings, primarily in schools or youth services, to which there were 72 respondents. The surveys primarily consisted of closed questions, and were electronically disseminated (and then snowballed) to teachers, youth workers, and other local authority staff/service providers throughout the area.

A second stage of the research involved focus groups with trans-identified young people (aged 14-19), parents of trans young people, and staff (see Table 2). These in-depth methods explored views and experiences related to the above topic areas in further detail than the questionnaires permitted. The (separate) groups with trans young people and their parents took place within existing youth/parent group meetings. Staff members in this stage of the research were those involved in running the youth and parent groups, and those who responded to an invitation to participate further in the research contained within the staff survey. Across both stages, staff participants included those who (knowingly) worked with trans youth, and those who did not. Their roles were within social work, teaching or youth work, but a precise breakdown is not provided to protect anonymity. A small number of telephone interviews (using the same questions) took place with staff members unable to attend a focus group.

[Table 2 here]

All individual interviews and focus groups were conducted by the author, digitally recorded, transcribed, and analysed thematically by identifying/categorising recurring themes arising throughout the data (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). Illustrative participant quotes are assigned pseudonyms and, where they first appear, given some demographic information. Whilst limitations to these studies are acknowledged in relation to size and potential for generalisation, taken together they offer original insights and illustrations about the limitations of a prevailing bullying discourse that could inform future policy, practice and research.

Beyond 'bullying'

Turning now to study data, this section examines what may be overlooked when bullying is the focus of attention within practice and research. First, however, it is important to note that not all homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying is only experienced by LGBT-identified young people, as it is often perceived 'difference' rather than self-identity that marks one out to be bullied (Davies, 2011; Walton, 2011). This means that heterosexual/cisgender youth can also experience these forms of bullying, whether by association or for not conforming to certain (gendered) societal expectations. Scholars have therefore argued that homophobic bullying is a manifestation of wider 'gender socialisation' (Pascoe, 2013), 'gender policing' (Payne and Smith, 2012, 2013) and/or 'gender regulation' (Rawlings and Russell, 2012) among young people that reproduces gender and sexual inequalities (Pascoe, 2013).

Bullying is widely understood (at least in the UK) to consist of physical and/or verbal actions between children that are intended to cause fear, distress or harm, and that are persistently repeated over a period of time (DfE, 2010; Farrington and Ttofi, 2009). Given that most understandings of bullying relate it to incidents between peers, a focus on

bullying by definition concentrates on young people (Walton, 2011), and therefore tends to neglect teachers and broader school policies and practices, and home/family life, which can have a significant impact on young people's experiences.

Both studies provided examples of participants stressing the role of staff and wider school contexts in facilitating or creating a negative environment for LGBT youth. In Study 1 there was evidence of teachers at a range of schools in the region publicly demonstrating discriminatory attitudes towards gay students. Young people recalled teachers saying:

> 'No wonder you get bullied because you act so gay' (Mark, male LGBT youth group member aged 15)

> 'If my son or my daughter was ever gay I'd take them into the back of my garden, tie them to the wall and shoot them with a shotgun' (Becky, female LGBT youth group member aged 16).

Whilst these may be atypical or 'extreme' examples, they were public knowledge amongst groups of LGBT young people (whether 'true' or not), and therefore made a significant contribution to the context within which those young people experienced/managed their identities.

In Study 2, the attitudes and actions of teachers were also raised by staff:

> 'Teachers themselves... will use inappropriate language to describe transgendered individuals and, you know, they are quite derogatory, you know, they call them trannie, they use the he/she/it terminology' (Jessica, practitioner).

Similar findings have been documented in the UK (e.g. McNamee et al, 2008), and in broader European research (Formby, 2014a: 6) where LGBTQ (where Q stands for queer) participants suggested that the most damaging homophobia they experienced was from teachers.

This suggests that, for some young people, homophobia/prejudice from teachers can be as problematic as homophobia or 'bullying' from peers. Policies and practices within schools were also experienced negatively by some LGB students. Examples included several schools in Study 1 that instructed (known) lesbian/gay students to change for physical education (PE) away from other students, making some feel singled out and excluded, and contributing to them not attending PE and/or school. In one case a student who attempted to resist was told she was 'causing a fuss', but elsewhere another student had co-operated with the school's instruction:

> 'At the end of the day it was partly my decision to do it 'coz I was scared of stuff that would get said or done' (Mark).

Young people thus responded to (negative) school environments with a combination of resistance, acquiescence, and avoidance/escapism (e.g. within youth services/groups), but they also identified means by which schools could improve. Macintosh (2007) has suggested the need for better education for early-career teachers, and this view was also supported among young people and practitioners in both studies:

> ‘I think the only reason why teachers respond the way that they do or act as uncomfortable as they do is because they don’t know enough about it [homosexuality]... some of them it’s not that they don’t like the idea of it, it’s that they don’t understand it and they don’t want to do anything wrong’ (Gemma, female LGBT youth group member aged 18)

> ‘I have just completed my teacher training and in the three years I have worked in education have never received any information about gender identity’ (Beth, practitioner).

A concentration on bullying among advocates and policymakers can neglect the impact of unsupportive home environments for some LGBT youth. In Study 1, for example, a youth worker reported cases of young people he supported becoming homeless following adverse reactions to their sexual and/or gender identities from parents and other family members (see also Jones and Hillier, 2013), yet this issue is not widely discussed in policy and practice arenas (in the UK), certainly in comparison to bullying.

In Study 2, both staff and young people identified issues that occurred at home. A particular concern was the use of pronouns and chosen names for trans young people:

> ‘I’ve had people get pissy with me when I correct them, like Mum and Dad sometimes do it, you know, they’ll go “yeah, whatever” and it’s like, this is something important... it is a big thing to me, you know, I don’t like the fact you’re always calling me [my old name]’ (Jack, trans youth group member aged 19).

Though not necessarily intended to cause distress or harm (cf. the definition of bullying above), the incorrect use of pronouns or names was said to cause stress, frustration, upset and anger, and it occurred within schools, colleges, workplaces, and at home, but can be un(der)acknowledged when understandings are limited to intentional ‘bullying’ between peers. A young person in Study 2, for instance, reported that at their school ‘the pastoral manager said… you’re making a big deal of something [i.e. pronoun usage] that doesn’t need to be made’. If we[8] look at young LGBT experiences through a broader lens than bullying, we can begin to (better) understand some of these other, additional issues, and their practice implications. Trans young people being chastised/disciplined within education contexts for challenging their peers or staff members on pronoun/name usage was not only unhelpful, but illustrates how school responses (and implicit lack of understanding) can compound young people’s negative experiences.

In other recent research young people have questioned the appropriateness of bullying terminology in relation to their experiences (Formby, 2014a), indicating instead that broader societal discrimination and/or pressures to conform to certain gendered expectations were experienced negatively. I suggest that these aspects are not sufficiently acknowledged, understood or addressed, in part, because of the hegemony of bullying discourses that narrow and restrict the focus of policy and practice.

[8] By ‘we’ and ‘our’, I mean those interested in bullying and the wider experiences of LGBT youth, e.g. academics (such as myself), parents, teachers/school staff, policymakers, other professionals with an interest in education and broader youth settings, and young people.

Questioning inevitability

Whilst a focus on bullying can divert attention from other issues, it can also contribute to a context where young people and/or staff members working with them assume that they will inevitably (and equally) face bullying (Aiden et al, 2013; Formby, 2013). This may be the case for some, but not everybody:

> 'As soon as I went back to school [after transitioning] I was expecting... being shoved into lockers and things, I don't know why, I just expected it [other group member interjects 'like on Glee']… Exactly... and it didn't happen to me... [even though] I hadn't told anybody... I basically came back from the six weeks and everything had changed... I feel almost bad that it hasn't happened now 'coz I feel like I braced myself for it and I'm still waiting for it to happen, and it's not happening' (Brody, trans youth group member aged 14)

> 'When I came out... I was wondering what kind of reaction am I gonna get... I was slightly nervous about that. But I was surprised. I got a few people who were a little bit confused about it and some people had trouble with the name at first... that was really the only problem there was' (Jack).

Whilst a certain level of (unwarranted) fear can be linked to broader evidence on self-censorship and negative expectations among LGBT people (Formby, 2012; Weeks et al, 2001), the specific impact of young people unnecessarily preparing themselves for bullying warrants further investigation. It is likely to require a fine balance on the part of staff working with young people: to appropriately manage, and yet not direct, young people's expectations, and to offer or provide young LGBT people with support, whilst not assuming or implying they need it. Some workers, whilst identifying the importance of supporting LGBT youth via specialist provision, also expressed caution in case it was assumed that LGBT youth automatically require support.

Assumptions or inferences about the inevitability of bullying, and a broader stress on young LGBT people's negative experiences, may also mean that some phenomena are misunderstood or viewed as more clear-cut by (adult) researchers and campaigners than they are seen by young people. One example concerns the use of language, wherein complexities (such as intent to cause upset or harm) are often not acknowledged within discussions of bullying.

Whilst some might consider the use of the word 'gay' to describe something negatively as homophobic, this cannot universally be understood as homophobic language or bullying because there are subtle differences of interpretation. These have been explored in recent research which has suggested that 'gay discourse' may be interpreted differently depending on levels of homophobia within given contexts (McCormack, 2012), and that nuanced differences between young people's interpretations of 'bullying', 'mucking about' and 'teasing' contribute to the complexity of language use which may be perceived as homophobic by others (Warwick and Aggleton, 2013).

Significantly, language that many (adult) campaigners and researchers define as homophobic is not necessarily understood as such by young people, including LGB young people themselves. In Study 1, many young people argued that the meaning of the word gay has 'evolved' from 'happy' to 'homosexual' to 'stupid' or 'rubbish'. Importantly, these

second and third meanings were not seen to be linked: calling something gay was said to be 'slang', and therefore not meant to be 'offensive' to gay people (see also McCormack, 2012; Rasmussen, 2004). The word gay was often used in different ways. For many young people it was acceptable to use gay to describe an object, such as a computer game they did not think was very good, but it was also understood to be potential bullying if used negatively to describe a person. The distinction between 'banter' or 'joking between friends' and bullying in these instances was often related to existing relationships between those involved. Methodologically, this means that research may not necessarily be able to report as bullying cases based only on people hearing particular language use. Equally, however, schools should not assume that certain language is always 'humorous' between friends (Formby, 2013; Phoenix et al, 2003), as some LGB young people said they found this language use 'offensive'. These different experiences and interpretations mean that it is a complex undertaking for schools to understand and address (homophobic) language use, as both intent and how it is received are significant.

(In)appropriate responses

A focus on homophobic (and to a lesser extent transphobic) bullying rather than broader (heteronormative) environments or cultures, influences individual and institutional responses, leading to a focus on individuals, primarily as 'bullies' and 'victims' (see also Pascoe, 2013; Payne and Smith, 2012, 2013). Responses, therefore, tended to be restricted to (individualised) 'punishment' for the bully and 'support' for the victim. This approach misses an opportunity to undertake broader education examining the wider social issues and influences on young people's attitudes and behaviours, and challenge heteronormativity, rather than merely 'include' LGBT identities within the curriculum via the tokenistic 'gay and lesbian issues' lesson (Maconitosh, 2007). It has been argued that bullies are merely 'over-zealous' (Davies, 2011) or 'extremely invested' (Payne and Smith, 2013) guardians of the normative order, i.e. the assumed superiority of heterosexuality in the case of homophobic bullying. This normativity therefore needs to be examined and addressed as much as, if not more than, its individual guardians (defined as 'bullies'). As Rachel said, schools should be:

> 'More open about it [sexual and gender identity] so it is not seen as something unusual or funny... so pupils can see that there's nothing strange about being LGBT' (Female heterosexual survey respondent aged 16).

One response to bullying, which sought to support LGB students via counselling, was viewed as problematic by some young people in Study 1 who connected it to a perception of blame:

> 'I was kind of like, hang on a minute, 'coz it kind of made me feel like, "oh is this my fault now, is there something wrong with me?"' (Becky).

Becky's perception supports Quinlivan's (2002: 22) suggestion that constructions of lesbian and gay youth as needing help mean that 'heteronormative discourses are reinforced while representations of same-sex desire are abnormalised'. A number of LGB young people felt that instead of providing counselling referrals, the schools should have

challenged the perpetrators of the bullying, with referral to counselling seen by some as teachers absolving their (schools') responsibility.

More often, young LGBT people in both studies said they valued LGBT-specific (youth) services, which did not equate with 'at fault' or 'victim' characterisations. Many appreciated belonging to their local youth group, which facilitated access to professional (youth worker) and peer support:

> 'You're meeting other young people who have been in the same shoes as you... and if you need help you can get it, and you can just talk to people and make new friends who are in the same boat' (Gemma).

These services were seen by more than one participant as making the difference between life and death:

> 'This is gonna sound really dramatic but I'd probably be dead if I never came here... because of the amount of bullying that you get and the way that people talk to you, the way that people react, you know, you just, you feel like crap, it's either someone's gonna end everything for you, or you're gonna end it for yourself' (Becky).

The safety, confidentiality and/or identity validation that such (youth service/group) environments provided was often seen as crucial because young people reported fearing coming out to their parents and/or school staff. In Study 2, young trans participants particularly valued workers understanding the importance of desired name and pronoun usage, as well as the opportunity to meet other trans young people. That youth workers understood the complexities of gender identities and expressions was compared to misunderstandings about trans people held more widely among other professionals, such as teachers and social workers. The value of supportive workers assisting with school and/or family relationships around and following the time of (gender expression and/or medical/surgical) 'transition' was also identified.

Arguments for more inclusive education, for instance within PSHE, alongside specialist services and/or specific responses to bullying were put forward by staff in Study 2, thereby acknowledging the potential for intervention beyond 'bully' and 'victim':

> 'I'd need to be Gove[9] for this but what I'd want is transphobia issues, transgender issues, to be part of our curriculum' (Jessica).

In Study 1, however, teachers were cautious, even in schools with explicit attempts to include 'lesbian and gay issues' within the formal curriculum:

> 'I think for here it has to be slow and steady… I think I'm always careful because I know the Head [teacher] would expect me to be' (Heather, practitioner).

This caution on the part of teachers talking about homosexuality has been noted previously (Epstein, 2000), but it is interesting that it continues, given the wider context of

[9] At the time, Michael Gove was Secretary of State for Education in England.

increasing equalities legislation in the UK. It also emphasises the disconnection between policy and practice efforts to address homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying and (lack of) teacher confidence to include LGBT identities within/across the curriculum. Where there is reluctance or opposition to approach sex(ual activities), and where sex is confused with broader sexual and gender identities, this manifests in minimal responses towards LGBT inclusion (let alone broader challenges to heteronormativity). As James observed amongst his colleagues:

> 'It's basically sex isn't it? …the majority of people think LGBT = sex …so people naturally tend to shy away from that' (Practitioner).

There is therefore a potential tension between efforts spent on anti-bullying initiatives and broader discomfort with sexuality in school settings which, if left unchallenged, does not support anti-bullying work.

In a policy context where schools must attend to safeguarding and child protection issues this confusion between sex and sexual or gender identity has further practical ramifications. Some schools in Study 1, for example, blocked access to websites deemed 'inappropriate', including websites targeted at supporting LGBT visibility within the curriculum (e.g. see www.schools-out.org.uk). In this context, it may be understandable that some teachers 'shy away' from sex, but this may mean that they also 'shy away' from addressing homophobia or heteronormativity within the classroom. Therefore, it may be easier or 'safer' for them to respond to individual cases of bullying than address the bigger picture, because bullying and 'at risk' agendas fundamentally desexualise and depoliticise the subject (Ellis, 2007; Quinlivan, 2002). As Jessica commented:

> 'From what I've heard teachers in the moment... will go, you know, "you can't do that, it's bullying"... but they don't challenge the actual... transphobia around that. They focus on the bullying and not the cause because I think they're uncomfortable'.

Macintosh (2007) has characterised this anti-bullying approach as equivalent to applying a sticking plaster or 'band-aid' to a much broader problem, i.e. heteronormativity.

In this research, differing approaches to homophobia/bullying were evident with greater emphases placed upon social rather than individual/biomedical understandings and responses to prejudice within youth work compared to schooling (Formby, 2013). In part, this reflects different approaches to working with young people, with at least some youth work explicitly drawing on a history of collectively challenging social inequalities (Bowler, 2013). By contrast, schooling is often characterised by 'right' and 'wrong', with teachers as authority figures (Formby, 2013; Phoenix et al, 2003), meaning that discussions about homophobia can be closed down under a 'zero tolerance' approach, rather than openly aired, and subsequently challenged (Formby, 2013). Walton (2011: 141) has described zero tolerance approaches as regulatory 'knee-jerk reactions' that police student behaviour whilst ignoring social differences and inequalities. However, the longevity of a broader youth work approach was questioned within Study 1, where Dave expressed concern about increasing focus on one-to-one work at the expense of group work and an analysis of 'the social':

> ‘We’re introducing... a medical model... there is something wrong with the individual, you’ve got to fix it’ (Practitioner).

Bowler (2013) also noted this gradual shift in youth work practice away from universal youth-centred provision towards an individualistic approach that focuses on ‘at risk’ youth. Bullying discourses thus feed into, and build upon, these wider individualistic models of working with young people.

Conclusion

Whilst there were young people in both studies who identified experiences of past or ongoing ‘bullying’, there were also participants who identified, and emphasised, inadequate or inappropriate actions from school staff that exacerbated their experiences. Others stressed that broader school policies and practices could also create, or at least contribute to, homophobia. I am not suggesting that institutional practices and policies are ‘bullying’, but that a broader view is needed to understand and respond to the experiences of LGBT youth more fully/appropriately. Because focussing on bullying diverts attention away from the influence of teachers and wider school practices, for example, the ability to identify staff training needs and offer support where it is needed is weakened (see also Payne and Smith, 2012). Uniformly focussing on homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying can also create or contribute to an implicit message that all LGBT youth are equally, and inevitably, ‘at risk’ or ‘vulnerable’, something contradicted in these and other studies (Bryan and Mayock, 2012; Cover, 2012). School policy and practice, popular culture, and activism can lead (albeit inadvertently) to an assumption that to be young and LGBT means facing adversity, thus minimising the potential for shared (public) stories of love, friendship and happiness amongst LGBT young people. In itself this can impact negatively upon LGBT young people’s identities and sense of self, which further research could usefully explore. In an attempt to improve the lives of young people, we should not over-state perceived ‘risks’ of identifying as LGBT, and/or portray LGBT young people as inherent ‘victims’ in need of ‘support’. In focusing on individualised anti-bullying and LGBT support agendas we may be inadvertently implying that being LGBT is part of the problem, and therefore the solution. Instead, we should be looking at how individuals and institutions construct and respond to LGBT people.

This paper highlights something of the complexity of issues surrounding homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying, and the necessity for nuanced responses from advocates and professionals working with young people. My aim is not to suggest that we should abandon the concept of, or responses to, bullying altogether, but that we should broaden both our underlying understanding, and the means by which we address identity-based discrimination and prejudice within youth settings. This would mean, for example, recognising that homophobia, biphobia and transphobia are issues for everyone, not only young people who identify as ‘bullied’ and/or LGBT. LGBT identities should be visibly embedded within a curriculum that seeks to challenge all forms of oppression and normativity, thus preventing schools from claiming (based on erroneous assumptions of LGBT visibility) that they do not need to include LGBT identities as they ‘do not have any’ LGBT students (Formby, 2013). This viewpoint implies that addressing homophobia, biphobia and transphobia is only relevant where there are (known to be) LGBT young people, rather than desirable and/or necessary in itself. An inclusive curriculum would mean

that anti-bullying work was not the only time LGBT identities 'appear' within schools. Welcomingly, recent UK government funding may signal a broadening perspective through emphasising a 'whole-school' approach to addressing homophobia, biphobia and transphobia (GEO, 2014), though still set within a strong bullying discourse.

In future policy and practice, thought needs to be given to how we support LGBT young people (if they want it) without suggesting or assuming all LGBT young people need support, and because they are LGBT, rather than because of the social context in which they are living. As Walton (2011: 142) argued, 'schools must acknowledge, address, and educate about notions of difference so that children who are vilified for being different (or perceived as such) are afforded safer learning environments'. Young people's wellbeing should also be supported outside of school by appropriate youth services for all young people, not only those identified as 'at risk', which has implications for potential improvements to whether/how schools signpost to external services.

There are also implications for future research as a focus on bullying may mean we do not elicit data on wider forms of discrimination or prejudice experienced by young people. Given that LGBT young people may be keen to share experiences of broader discrimination or prejudice, use of the word bullying may deter some potential participants from becoming involved. Equally, targeting only LGBT youth within research may mean we do not capture experiences of homophobia, biphobia or transphobia among self-identified heterosexual and/or cisgendered young people. An explicit focus on negative experiences may also discourage participants from reporting if/how prejudice might have inspired activism (Jones and Hillier, 2013) or motivation and determination to succeed in education and employment (Formby, 2014a). Researchers should also be mindful of the complexity of language use, in case certain language is automatically interpreted as bullying which may not accord with some (LGBT) young people's intentions or experiences. Future policy, practice and research would benefit from a broader focus on school and youth cultures, informed by wider social structures, rather than the perceived aggression of (individual) 'bullies' or the perceived 'riskiness' or 'vulnerability' of LGBT identities.

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Table 1: Study 1 in-depth stage research sites and participants

Sites	Participants		Total participants
	Staff members	Young people	
Secondary school 1	2 teachers	1 group of 8	**30 participants within secondary schools**
Secondary school 2	1 teacher	1 group of 18	
Secondary school 3	1 teacher	0**	
Area-based youth service 1	1 youth worker*	2 groups (7 in total)	**22 participants within area-based youth services**
Area-based youth service 2		2 groups (13 in total)	
Area-based youth service 3	1 youth worker	0**	
LGBT youth service 1	1 youth worker	1 group of 10	**22 participants within LGBT youth services**
LGBT youth service 2	1 youth worker	1 group of 9	
LGBT youth service 3	1 youth worker	0**	
Total participants	**9**	**8 groups = 65**	**74**

* This staff member worked across two youth services in different locations.

** Due to youth service funding cuts or other logistical factors (e.g. exams) young people from these settings were subsequently not able to be included within the research.

Table 2: Study 2 research methods and participants

Methods used	Young people	Adults	
		Staff working with young people	Parents of trans young people
2 online surveys	37	72	-
3 focus groups	7	3	6
4 individual telephone interviews	-	4	-
Sub-totals	44	85	
Total	**129**		