



GAY AND LESBIAN EQUALITY NETWORK

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Submission to

Commission of the European Communities

Commission Staff Working Paper (SEC (2007) 1009)

Schools for the 21st Century

Submitted by:

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A. Background Information on GLEN

GLEN (Gay and Lesbian Equality Network) is a policy focused non-governmental organisation that works to achieve equality for lesbian, gay and bisexual people in Ireland through advocating for change in legislation, social policy and service delivery. GLEN is part funded by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and the Department of Health and Children and has very constructive working relationships with a range of Government and State Agencies including the Department of Education and Science with whom a number of initiatives are currently underway.

Education plays a pivotal role in developing young people's capacity to reach their full human potential. A priority for GLEN is to ensure a climate of safety, support, acknowledgment and affirmation exists in schools whereby lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people like their heterosexual peers can achieve their full potential. GLEN's education initiative involves working with a range of stakeholders within education in order to develop effective school policies and procedures to ensure that schools are safe and inclusive learning environments for LGB young people.

B. GLEN is an affiliated member of ILGA –Europe and endorses the submission from IGYLO and ILGA-Europe on *Schools for the 21st Century*.

C. Background Information on LGB Issues in Irish Education

While significant progress has been made in recent years with regard to advancing equality for lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people in civil society throughout Ireland and Europe school continues to be a site where significant inequalities are experienced by LGB people.

Ireland has very progressive legislation protecting young people from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender (amongst seven other grounds including age, race, marital status, family status, religion, disability, and membership of the Traveller Community).

Despite this many young people identifying as lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) continue to experience school negatively due to the combined impact of invisibility and silence and a climate of name-calling, homophobic bullying and harassment.

Recognition of homophobia in schools

Largely due to historical religious influence schools are often reluctant to address issues related to sexual orientation resulting in silence and invisibility of the existence of LGB students as part of every school population. Ultimately this means that this minority receive no positive recognition either in the day to day activities of the school or in official policy documents. In Ireland research (Norman, Galvin & McNamara, 2006) found that:

- 9 out of 10 teachers reported their school's anti-bullying policy *did not* include any reference to lesbian and gay related bullying.
- 8 out of 10 teachers reported being aware of instances of verbal homophobic bullying
- 16% were aware of physical bullying in their school.

Impact of Homophobia

Homophobia impacts on all young people. How it is addressed (or not) is a measure of how inclusive a school is with regard to respect for, and acceptance of, diversity.

Use of the word 'gay' is the primary term of abuse within Irish schools (Lodge & Lynch, 2002). It is used to undermine and derogate targeted LGB students; it is also used to undermine and disrespect other students who are perceived to be LGB possibly because they do not fit into typical gender stereotypes.

The pervasive culture of anti-gay bias and homophobic abuse is catastrophically damaging on the lives of young people identifying as LGB. In research carried out by the Anti-Bullying Centre in Trinity College Dublin (Minton, Dahl, O'Moore and Tuck, 2006) focusing on the experiences of young LGB people found that as a result of bullying and name-calling:

- Three-quarters of the respondents reported having experienced verbal abuse
- 40% experienced physical abuse
- 15% reported having attempted suicide and one in five self-harmed
- 42% reported an eating disorder, alcohol abuse or drug misuse
- 29% reported having practiced unsafe sex
- 3.3% dropped out of school early.

The results of this study have strong parallels with research commissioned by the Department of Education in Northern Ireland (Youthnet, 2004) in which it was found that young LGB people when compared to their heterosexual counterparts, are:

- At least **three times** more likely to attempt suicide,
- **Two and a half times** more likely to self harm,
- **Five times** more likely to be medicated for depression,
- **Twenty times** more likely to suffer from an eating disorder, as a consequence of homophobic bullying and harassment.

It is clear from this research that LGB students and those perceived to be, represent a vulnerable minority group within our education system.

D. Response to Questions Posed in Consultation Document

GLEN welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Commission Staff Working Paper *Schools for the 21st Century*. In reference to the context outlined above responses are provided below to questions 1, 3, 4, 6, 7 and 8.

Q1: How can schools be organised in such a way as to provide all students with the full range of key competencies?

In order to allow each student to develop the full range of key competencies schools should be organised in such a way as to offer all schools a breath of subjects and programmes and to take into account subject choices that may have traditionally been made based on gender. Science, technology and physical education should be promoted and encouraged amongst female students; equally art, music, social and home sciences should be promoted and encouraged amongst male students.

Promotion and encouragement of subject choice based on interest and not gender-stereotype should be integrated into anti-bullying programmes and policies in schools in order to ensure that harassment and bullying is not a factor for students in making their choice.

Similarly there should be a balance of teaching methodologies and pedagogical approaches in the transmission of the formal curriculum. The curriculum should be

rebalanced to address the over emphasis on linguistic and mathematical based subjects to give equal weight to subjects associated with spatial, bodily kinaesthetic and musical intelligences.

Learning to Learn is a key competency that requires progressive development over the educational lifetime of each student. In effect it should become the core competency of the each area of the curriculum and fully integrated with each of the other key competencies identified.

Q3: How can school systems contribute to supporting long-term sustainable economic growth in Europe?

Ireland has enjoyed much economic growth in recent decades, with this has come a rapidly changing cultural and ethnic change in our population. The challenge of embracing diversity in all its manifestations has been one that Ireland has embraced enthusiastically. We acknowledge that societies that are truly respectful of diversity must work at being achieved. Pro-activity is the keystone of such achievement.

Too often the concepts of economic growth are juxtaposed against provision for equality. One is seen as taking from the other; however GLEN believes that greater levels of equality will in fact support long-term sustainable economic growth. US economist Professor Richard Florida has said that openness and acceptance of gay people is a key indicator of the diversity necessary for stimulating creativity, generating innovations and increasing wealth and economic growth. Similarly in schools, emphasis on the key competencies of intercultural, interpersonal and civic competencies will contribute towards greater achievement in other spheres of education and workplace practice.

Q4. How can school systems best respond to the need to promote equity, to respond to cultural diversity and to reduce early school leaving?

Ireland along with Europe shares the view that there is a growing imperative on the development of school systems to take account of the ever changing ethnic and cultural composition of our school populations. Currently in Ireland over 10% of the population were born outside the State, and this is projected to rise to 18% by 2030. The imperative is even greater when one adds on the existing, if somewhat conservative estimate of 6%¹ that are LGB.

However given the silence and invisibility that pervades issues of sexual orientation in our schools currently, a key challenge for schools in the 21st Century in responding to this question is the recognition of cultural diversity in its broadest form. Schools systems need to recognise that a minority of the student population are LGB; they also need to recognise that currently this minority are disadvantaged in many of our schools due to homophobic bullying and harassment, the impacts on which including early-school leaving, have been outlined earlier.

- It has been found that in schools that have explicitly acknowledged and strongly disapproved of homophobia LGB young people are 60% more likely not to have been bullied (Stonewall, 2007).
- Homophobic bullying should be addressed explicitly within anti-bullying policies. Policies need to be implemented continuously with the support of education programmes that give a clear message that homophobic bullying, along with all forms of bullying will not be tolerated.

¹ National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles II, 2000-2001. UK.

- Information and support appropriate to the needs of each student should be provided by key personnel in schools and displayed in prominent locations including on school websites and other display fora.
- Leadership is required from the highest levels demonstrating intolerance for homophobic bullying and harassment. This is particularly pertinent in the context of schools with a religious ethos which can sometimes be seen as a barrier to addressing homophobic bullying.

Q6. How can school communities help to prepare young people to be responsible citizens, in line with fundamental values such as peace and tolerance of diversity?

- In order to promote equity school systems and those responsible for the direction of policy and programmes within them need to approach cultural diversity broadly to include diversity in all its manifestations including that of sexual orientation.
- Schools should be encouraged and supported through resources to develop programmes that acknowledge the intrinsic value of diversity and that are aimed at promoting respect and intolerance of behaviour that is disrespectful and damaging.
- Programmes that promote democratic deliberation, dialogue and conflict resolution should be given space and placed as prominently in the curriculum as the traditional core subjects such as maths, sciences and languages.

Q7. How can school staff be trained and supported to meet the challenges they face?

- Provision should be made by Government Education Departments and Colleges of Education for both initial teacher training and continuing professional development aimed at developing teachers' awareness of the needs of LGB learners in schools and how to address them. Training initiatives such as those developed by the Relationships & Sexuality Education Support Service in Ireland should be developed to be provided to all teachers.
- The Department of Education & Science in Ireland recently awarded a research grant to NUI Maynooth in partnership with GLEN. The research will explore how issues of sexual orientation are recognised and addressed in schools and how they can be best addressed. Such research projects should be supported across Europe and learning disseminated to address current and future practice.

Q8. How can school communities' best receive the leadership and motivation they need to succeed? How can they be empowered to develop in response to changing needs and demands?

Partnerships involving all partners in education including young people and parents should be supported and resourced to allow for inclusive and equity based educational provision that acknowledges and addresses the needs of all learners, including LGB learners. Leadership for such partnerships is necessary from the highest levels of the Education Departments. GLEN is currently working on the development of resources for schools in addressing LGB issues in partnership with the Department of Education. The opportunity exists for such initiatives to be built upon and developed into the future.

References

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