

The experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual students and staff at a Further Education college in South East England

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Abstract

Research exploring the educational experiences of LGB students and staff members has traditionally been characterised by homophobia, hostility, victimisation and marginalisation. Recent research has evidenced a shift in the experiences of LGB young people, to somewhat more accepting and positive narratives, including within post-compulsory schooling. Yet, there is limited research exploring the lived experiences of LGB staff members in the Further Education context. Utilising inclusive masculinity as a sociological paradigm, this research explores the qualitative data from the narratives of 26 LGB staff and students at one Further Education college in the South of England. The results find a distinct lack of homophobia within this college, a nuanced understanding of homosexually themed language, an organisational culture of inclusivity and widespread symbolic visibility of the LGB community. Overall, our research aligns with broader social patterns that the experiences for LGB persons is improving.

Introduction

Scholarship on sexualities has mapped the changing experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB)¹ youth over the past two decades (Anderson et al., 2016; Anderson & McCormack, 2016; Morris, McCormack & Anderson, 2014). For example, while educational research in the 1980s and 1990s found high levels of homophobia in the United Kingdom (Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Thurlow, 2001), the experiences of gay and lesbian students in the 21st century have seen a significant improvement (McCormack, 2012a, 2012b, 2014; Blanchard et al., 2017; White and Hobson, 2017).

Unlike students, the experiences of LGB teachers are not well documented in academic scholarship, but for some notable exceptions. Rofes (2000), for instance, shows that teachers feel the need to manage their identities, often splitting their private lives from their professional lives (see also Griffin, 1998; Jackson, 2006; Wardle, 2009). As such, many LGB teachers conceal their sexual identity from colleagues and, even more so, from students (Wardle, 2009). Educators who do come out, with varying degrees of disclosure to students and staff, receive a range of experiences, including victimisation, harassment and discrimination (Mills, 2007). Thus, further work is required to understand educators' experiences in the intersection of sexualities, homophobia and education.

Drawing on 26 interviews with students and staff at one Further Education (FE) college in South East England, this research examines the experiences of openly LGB students and staff in education. It finds a near-total absence of homophobia, with students creating an open and inclusive environment for sexual minorities—in which teachers also contribute. Although not all LGB teachers are out to students—primarily due to the complex and often sensitive nature of their jobs—they still document a positive outlook on their college regarding sexual diversity. We thus argue that the homophobic and oppressive education system of the 1980s and 1990s (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Mac an Ghaill, 1994) no longer dominate the schooling experiences for LGB teachers and students.

Sexualities in education: The 1980s and 1990s

The 1980s and 1990s were a particularly homophobic period in Western cultures (Loftus, 2001). The AIDS crisis, which became closely intertwined with the gay community, led to a rise of conservative politics and religiosity—thus influencing cultural antipathy towards homosexuality (Anderson, 2009). Clements and Field (2014) use several data sources to show that cultural aversion towards homosexuality peaked in the late 1980s, with 75% of the British population believing that same-sex sex was 'always wrong' or 'mostly wrong'. Loftus (2001) documents similarly intolerant attitudes towards homosexuality in the US within the same time frame.

Given these high levels of homophobia, it is perhaps unsurprising that a significant body of research documented a hostile environment for LGB students in the British education system (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Plummer, 1999; Salisbury & Jackson, 1996). Here, sexual minorities were victimised and socially excluded through a range of mechanisms, such as the use of homophobic language (Plummer, 1999; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Rivers, 2011), heterosexist curricula (Atkinson & DePalma, 2008), and symbolically through the enactment of Section 28 of the Local Government Act (Nixon

& Givens, 2007). The impact of homophobia increased rates of absenteeism, social isolation, and dropout in school (Rivers, 2001; Warwick, Aggleton, & Douglas, 2001).

Homophobic language—defined here as the use of anti-gay language used to wound another person—has been listed as the primary mechanism through which homophobic bullying in schools occurs (Ellis & High, 2004; Nayak & Kehily, 1996). Indeed, Rivers (1995) found that gay students experienced high levels of name-calling and other various forms of discursive ridicule. Similarly, Thurlow (2001) found that 10% of abusive language in schools had a homosexually-themed nature. Employing such language, according to McCormack (2012), serves two purposes: 1) It is the easiest way to show intellectual antipathy toward homosexuality (Plummer, 1999); 2) Discursively policing another's masculinity promotes one's own masculine capital (Epstein, 1993). These were essential components of a homophobic school environment.

This was also evidenced by a heteronormative curriculum (Ellis & High, 2004), which often fails to engage with sexually diverse narratives and themes. Research conducted by Trenchard and Warren (1984) found that only 42% (174 out of 416) of LGB students recalled homosexuality being mentioned within the secondary school curriculum. Replicating the study, Ellis and High (2004) found an increase in the discussion of homosexuality, but only in a few subjects. Overall, only 24% of students in 2004 found that homosexuality had not been mentioned at all, a 34% decrease compared with almost two decades earlier. In their *School Report*, Stonewall—the UK's largest LGBT advocacy group—found that 53% of their respondents had never been taught anything related to LGBT issues within their lessons (Guasp, 2012).

A key influence in the systemic silencing of homosexual themes or topics within the curriculum was the Conservative legislation, Section 28 of the Local Governments Act (1988). This policy impeded the 'promotion' of homosexuality by local authorities and thus silenced many sexual identities which did not conform to right-wing family ideals. Moran (2001) indicates this legislation held no legal power over schools, who deliver the curriculum, and the government, who develop the curriculum. Indeed, Section 28 'has no legal clout in schools and there have been no prosecutions in connection with it' (Moran, 2001, p. 74). Burrige (2004) has also questioned Section 28's power by highlighting how the 'promotion' wording is vague and ambiguous.

Sexualities in education: The 2000s

In contrast to the toxic atmosphere of the previous two decades, attitudes toward sexual minorities have improved significantly since the turn of the millennium (Clements & Field, 2014). In British education, recent research has documented an emergent shift in the experiences of LGB youth (McCormack & Anderson, 2010; White & Hobson, 2017). Most notably, McCormack's (2012a) ethnographic research showed that heterosexual male students espoused inclusive attitudes towards gay students and rather attached stigma to any form of homophobia. Accordingly, this influenced an expansion of boys' gendered behaviours, with softer constructions of heterosexual masculinity compared to older research (Roberts, 2013).

Unlike traditional research that suggested boys who aligned to orthodox masculinity held a privileged and hegemonic positioning among peers (Connell 1995), McCormack's

participants often displayed softer and more inclusive masculine gender performances: they were emotionally intimate and physically tactile, with several examples of boys naming their friends 'boyfriend' or 'lover'. Moreover, McCormack's (2012a) research also shows that boys espoused unanimously positive attitudes towards homosexuality, and that 'the boys...stand firmly and publicly against homophobia. When the issue of homophobia is raised in interviews, all participants position themselves against it' (McCormack, 2011, p. 91). Gay students were popular among peers and included in all social activities; one openly gay student was even voted President of the Student Union, after utilising his feminine identity as part of his election campaign.

Similar research has supported the notion that homophobia is decreasingly effective in the policing of gender and sexuality in the British education system. Blanchard et al.'s (2017) research on working-class boys in a Christian sixth form college in the North of England showed that they espoused positive attitudes towards homosexuality, engaged in physical closeness, were emotionally intimate, and detached homophobia from use of homosexually-themed language. In Scotland, Campbell et al.'s (2016) research on physical education showed similar levels of inclusivity, and boys in their research acknowledged that 'niceness, friendliness and kindness...led to high social status in their school' (p. 219). The recognition of sexually inclusive attitudes, positive framing of homosocial tactility and softer masculinities is continuing to dominate education research among contemporary adolescence.

Although most contemporary literature indicates that a shift towards inclusivity has occurred, there remain some areas that require further exploration to build a more holistic understanding of homophobia in British education. For example, the narratives of LGB students are secondary to the attitudes of heterosexual participants in many of the recent studies conducted (Blanchard et al., 2017; Campbell et al. 2016; McCormack, 2012; White and Hobson, 2017). Although some, such as Morris (2015), have presented positive retrospective narratives of gay youth to fill this void, it is essential to hear the voices of current LGBT students within education (see also Coleman-Fountain, 2014; Savin-Williams, 2017). Similarly, LGB staff in education are often excluded from research, and their experiences need to be recognised as essential components of the educational landscape (Nixon & Givens, 2007).

LGB staff

While a plethora of research has focused on the experiences of contemporary LGB youth in education, there remains a dearth of current research on the experiences of LGB staff in the British education system. The lack of research may be attributable to the tensions teachers experience in their classroom identity management, often resulting in a bifurcation of teachers' public and private lives (Connell, 2015; Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013; Gray, 2013; Rofes 2000; Wardle 2009). Wardle's (2009) research found teachers disclose their sexual orientation to varying levels in the United Kingdom, with a binary from being closeted to being open (Gray, 2013). Teachers are often subjected to identity conflicts, whereby their professional *teacher identity* and their *sexual identity* are seen as incompatible in the school environment (Jackson, 2006; Rofes, 2000). As such, behaving professionally in the school terrain requires an asexual persona, which, for LGB communities, requires being closeted and therefore assumed heterosexual by others in the heteronormative context of schooling

(Connell, 2015; Ferfolja & Hopkins, 2013; Gray, 2013; Neary, 2013; Rumens & Kerfoot, 2009).

There may be a variety of influencing factors for educators to consider when making decisions regarding their levels of disclosure in the educational context. Firstly, much of education is positioned as non-political, heteronormative and asexual in nature (Epstein and Johnson, 1998). Subsequently, LGB teachers' who disclose their sexual identities are indirectly challenging many of the underlying ideologies and hidden curricula within education. Although some may not see LGB teachers challenging these ideologies as problematic, fear of backlash from parents, colleagues or the wider community may act as a deterrent for coming out (Connell, 2015; Jackson, 2006; Wardle 2009). Much of this perceived backlash is grounded in 'mythologies that link homosexuality with child molestation, promiscuity, effeminacy, mental instability, and disease' (Ferfolja, 2009, p. 383; see also Olson, 1987). In some contexts, LGB teachers have worries about losing their jobs or having their career development thwarted (Wardle, 2009).

LGB teachers in schools have a range of experiences, including acceptance and harassment. In Wardle's (2009) research on teachers in the United Kingdom, he found teachers were subjected to a range of discriminatory behaviours from students and staff, including subtle comments, jocular innuendos and verbal abuse. Although there is little opportunity to discriminate against LGB teachers in the UK, as a result of sexual orientation being a protected characteristic of the Equalities Act (2010), some have suggested they are harassed by colleagues in career progression situations, often being undervalued (Wardle, 2009). In contrast, LGB teachers also have many positive experiences of being open regarding their sexuality. Wardle (2009) found they were able to become role models to students, engage in open discussions of sexual diversity and had support from students, colleagues and management.

Theorising educational masculinities

Hegemonic Masculinity Theory (HMT) has been conceptually dominant in the understanding of gender stratification in homophobic contexts (Connell, 1995). Connell's work recognises the power-relations among men in contexts where homophobia is a useful tool in policing gender (Kimmel, 1994). Connell (2005) suggests, '...one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted' (p. 77). Although Connell does not define this culturally dominant archetype of masculinity, she is clear that gay men reside at the bottom of the gender order. It is therefore widely accepted that an orthodox notion of masculinity, premised on compulsory heterosexuality and gender typical behaviours, represents a hegemonic form of masculinity (Kimmel, 1994; Mac an Ghail, 1994; Plummer, 1999; Pronger 1990). Although the theory was reformulated in 2005 (see Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) in response to numerous critiques, our primary concern is the inability of Hegemonic Masculinity Theory to accurately conceptualise masculinities in an era of declining homophobia (Magrath, 2017a).

Instead, we rely on Anderson's (2009) Inclusive Masculinity Theory (IMT), which has been recognised as a more nuanced conceptual framework for understanding the decline of homophobia in Anglo-American societies and the impact that has on the lives and experiences of LGB persons (Anderson, 2009). This theory emerged from Anderson's (2009)

research on gay athletes and gender-integrated team sports. In contrast to much of the previous literature (Pronger, 1990), Anderson showed two things: first, multiple masculinities were culturally esteemed and valued; second, that openly gay athletes were having increasingly positive experiences in the 21st century. To this end, Inclusive Masculinity Theory acknowledges that homophobia's cultural ability to police male gender was declining (Anderson, 2014).

A central component of Inclusive Masculinity theory is the concept of homophobia. Defined by Anderson (2011, p. 83) as a 'homosexually-panicked culture in which suspicion [of homosexuality] permeates', it provides a more nuanced understanding of masculinities and sexualities in a homophobic environment. In this context, people fear being considered or branded as homosexual. A culture can be described as homophobic when three variables are met: 1) societal acceptance that homosexuality exists as a sexual orientation within a significant portion of the population; 2) widespread cultural hostility towards homosexuality; 3) a conflation of homosexuality with gender atypical behaviours (see McCormack and Anderson, 2014).

The growing body of empirical research using inclusive masculinities as a theoretical paradigm has found an array of more egalitarian and socially positive behaviours among primarily adolescent and young men (Anderson, 2014). Today, young men typically adopt pro-gay attitudes and values (e.g. Magrath, 2017a), permitting them to engage in a wider variety of gendered behaviours, such as emotionally intimate (Robinson, White & Anderson, 2017), physically tactile (Anderson & McCormack, 2014), and happy to engage in traditionally feminised activities (Roberts, 2013). In the educational context, Ripley et al. (2012), Bush et al. Carr (2012) and others (Anderson et al., 2016; McCormack et al. 2015) have repeatedly found positive attitudes to LGB peers. It is in this cultural zeitgeist that our work looks to explore both the narratives of LGB staff members and students at the same time.

Method

Context and participants

This research was located at a Further Education (FE) college based in an affluent city in the south of England, that we call Newcombe College. This college is based in a city that has only one other provider for tertiary education (a school sixth form) and has a catchment area that dominates much of the county it is located within. The college currently has 5000 students registered across a range of full-time, part-time, and distance learning courses, on a multi-campus site in the city. These courses consist of a range of qualifications, including GCSEs, A Levels, Access to Higher Education Diplomas, as well as a variety of BTEC courses (Levels 1, 2 and 3). In its most recent inspection in 2013, it was rated 'good' by Ofsted.

Access to the college was granted as the first author made contact with the College Principal, and explained he wanted to investigate the nature of LGB-friendliness in the college. Posters advertising the research were then displayed in prominent places across the main college campus. All students and staff were also sent an email outlining the main purpose of the research. Nine emails were then received (four staff and five students); but the majority of participants were recruited through snowball sampling.

Utilising a snowball sampling approach allowed us to recruit more LGB students and staff that may not have been recruited through less personal strategies (e.g. Noy, 2008). Recognising that snowball sampling may lead to higher numbers of participants from similar friendship networks (Newman, 2010), staff members from various faculties of the college also assisted with the recruitment of participants—thus expanding the participant base to a wide spread of college students.

A total of 26 interviews were conducted with students and staff at Newcombe College: 15 with students and 11 with staff. As documented in the demographics shown in table 1, students were a mix of genders, with eight males and seven females, and were aged between 16 and 22. Ten self-identified as gay or lesbian, two were bisexual, and three were heterosexual. All but two were White British, with the exceptions being Black British and Mixed Race. The eleven staff who were interviewed consisted of nine males and two females, and were aged between 23 and 57. Six identified as gay or lesbian, three were bisexual, and two were straight. All but two were White British, with the exceptions being Mixed Race and Chinese. The inclusion of heterosexual allies was a product of the snowball sampling strategy, whereby LGB students and staff suggested seeking the narratives of allies to explore the culture of the college regarding LGB equality.

	Students	Staff
Male	8	9
Female	7	2
Gay or Lesbian	10	6
Bisexual	2	3
Heterosexual ally	3	2
Black British	1	0
Chinese	0	1
Mixed Race	1	1
White British	13	9

Interviews were conducted by the first author and examined a variety of themes, such as: outness (the degree to which LGB persons are out and to whom), experiences, homophobic bullying, language, and overall environment within the college. All interviews were conducted on-site at a time and location convenient to the participant. They ranged between 20 minutes and 56 minutes length, averaging approximately 35 minutes. Interviews were digitally recorded before being transcribed verbatim. They were then independently coded by each author using a constant-comparative method of emerging themes (Emerson et al., 1995). The codes were regularly discussed and agreed by all three authors to ensure reliability of the themes (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984).

Ethical approval was granted by each authors' institution prior to the research being conducted. Gatekeeper access was obtained by the Principal of Newcombe College reviewing the project design and ethical processes. Because Newcombe College is an educational institution, it is bound by safeguarding practices for young people. Notably for this research,

confidentiality could be broken in the event of a safeguarding concern being disclosed to the researcher, if there was believed there is be a significant risk of harm to a young person. Any disclosures which implied a safety risk to any child would be reported immediately to appropriate agencies (such as the police or children's social care). However, this was not necessary at any time in the research process.

Participants were issued with a participant information sheet, outlining all ethical processes, and were asked to sign a consent form. Participants aged under 18 years at the time of the research were required to have their consent forms countersigned by a parent or guardian. All procedures followed the ethical guidelines detailed by the British Sociological Association (BSA). Participants had the right to withdraw, to not answer any question and to review the transcription before it was analysed, though none did. All names were changed to pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants, those that they named, and their institution.

Results

Lack of homophobia

Older research in British education has traditionally shown high levels of homophobia (Epstein and Johnson, 1998; Mac an Ghail, 1994), primarily exhibited through the use of homophobic language (Thurlow, 2001) and heteronormative curricula (Ellis and High, 2004). However, results in this research were congruent with more recent research, which documents greater acceptance of LGB students (Blanchard *et al.*, 2017; McCormack, 2012a, 2012b). Indeed, our interviews found a complete absence of homophobia, inequality or oppression for gay, lesbian and bisexual students at Newcombe College.

When asked about homophobia in the college environment, every LGB student we interviewed spoke of their positive experiences. Gabby, an openly lesbian 17-year-old student, said, 'I've experienced nothing homophobic at this college'. Similarly, Ed, an 18-year-old openly gay male student, said, 'I've had no bad experiences...I've been completely accepted by everyone'. And Phil, a 20-year-old bisexual male student, said that, 'People know I'm bi and have no issues with it at all'.

These positive assertions were also mirrored by the heterosexual students we interviewed. Helen, a 19-year-old female student, said that, 'I've never seen any abuse or homophobic language. There's a very strong feeling that the college want to include the LGBT community'. Similarly, Julia, a 16-year-old female student, said that she had 'never seen anything bad' in her year at the college. The inclusivity of LGB students into friendship networks was also treated as routine. Indeed, Steven, a 17-year-old heterosexual student said that, 'Everyone is friends with everyone...There's no exclusion at all from my experiences here'.

Discussions of unanimous acceptance also extend to teachers and staff who declared that they had not experienced nor witnessed any cases of homophobic bullying at Newcombe College (c.f. Rivers, 2011). Billy, for example, an openly gay member of the senior management team, felt strongly about the inclusive environment of the college: 'I have never witnessed or experienced any homophobic bullying, and the students don't come across as homophobic in any way'. Interestingly, Ted, a bisexual male teacher, acknowledged that the college had previously had a reputation for being 'quite bad' for LGB students, but said, 'I

can't bring to memory any instances of homophobia for any of the time I've worked here'. This was also corroborated by Joshua, a heterosexual learning support worker, who said, 'I've seen nothing [negative] at all, which is great'. Thus, there is agreement between LGB and heterosexual staff that Newcombe College represents a liberal environment for sexual minorities.

This is further evidenced by every LGB student which we interviewed declaring that they could be open about their sexual identity among friends, classmates and teachers (c.f. Khayatt, 1992). Many were adamant that their openness was a positive factor to be embraced. For example, Oliver, an openly gay 18-year-old student, said that he is 'open with everybody'. Jimmy, another openly gay student, said he was open about his sexuality: 'I'm open and out to my friends, family and even random strangers...it's just the norm'. Similarly, Kerry, an 18-year-old bisexual female student, said that, 'I've been open since my first day here and nobody really cares'.

For teachers, however, there were varying levels of openness regarding their sexual identity (see table 2). Although none of the staff members in this research actively hid their sexuality, some did not see it as important to their workplace identity. In other words, whereas the students at Newcombe College were keen to discuss their sexuality, teachers appeared to be less forthright on disclosing their sexual orientation so openly—something perhaps attributable to their own negative schooling experiences and a perceived pressure to bifurcate their identities. For instance, Eddie, a bisexual male support staff member, said that, 'I don't think I would be open. I've never hidden it but I haven't talked to anyone about it here'. Similarly, Jane, a lesbian teacher, said, 'I'm not sure if my students know or not. I wouldn't mind them knowing, but don't really see it as important'.

Pseudonym	Degree of openness
Eddie	Not out to students. Out to some staff.
Jane	Not out to students, but would not mind being out to students. Out to staff.
Kris	Varying degrees of outness, depending on students' maturity. Out to staff.
Billy	Out to staff and students
Ted	Out to staff and students
Eddie	Out to staff and students
Simon	Out to staff and students
Tom	Out to staff and students
Abbie	Out t staff and students

Other staff were more open regarding their sexual orientation, however. For example, Tom, a head of department, said that, 'Even during my interview here, I was very open about my sexuality and that didn't deter my chances of getting the job'. Similarly, Simon, a dance teacher, commented that, 'I'm open with everyone—I'm not sure I could hide it'. Some staff discussed factors which may have influenced their level of disclosure. Kris, a gay teacher,

was highly cautious about who he reveals his sexuality to, something based on the perceived levels of maturity among his students: ‘Certain Level 3 BTEC students I would tell, but I wouldn’t be so keen to tell my Level 2 students I was gay’. Overall, however, the experiences of LGB teachers at Newcombe College were largely positive, and we were not aware of any completely closeted teachers, nor any reason for them to remain closeted.

Homosexually-themed language at Newcombe College

Like many of the respondents in previous studies (McCormack et al., 2016; Magrath, 2017b; Sexton 2017), the students and teachers in our research suggested homosexually-themed language is more complex than often expressed in academic research or popular media. The use of homosexually-themed terms, such as ‘that’s so gay’, can be used in a positive fashion, such as a mechanism for bonding between friends. Eddie recalls a time where a heterosexual female student used the term ‘fag hag’ to describe herself, saying ‘he [the gay student] turned it into a positive thing, so he thought it was funny and wasn’t bothered by it at all’. Similarly, Emily said, ‘I’m known as the lesbian to my mates. It’s just what they call me. I think it’d be weird if they called me something else’. In this context, it can be seen that homosexually-themed language is used for empowering purposes and appropriated to express positivity (McCormack, 2012a).

Indeed, this research shows a general acceptance of homosexually-themed language among students. One gay student, Jimmy, confirmed this: ‘When someone says, ‘that’s so gay’, it doesn’t faze me. It just makes me chuckle’. When asked about the use of homosexually-themed language, Oliver, another gay student, commented, ‘Sometimes I say it. But in a way that means someone is effeminate or camp, not stupid’. Samuel, an openly gay male student, provided an alternative interpretation of homosexually-themed language: ‘I think generally people use it when something’s bad or gone wrong. I don’t think it’s ever used in a bad way’. Thus, the overarching consensus among LGB students at Newcombe College is that use of homosexually-themed language is not deemed homophobic, because they are used in an environment where neither pernicious intent nor negative effect are intended (McCormack *et al.*, 2017).

In contrast, teachers interpreted homosexually-themed language differently. Although they recognised that language has multiple uses and intentions, many of the teachers at Newcombe College believed that the sheer presence of homosexually-themed language was negative. Kris, a gay teacher, said that, ‘I don’t think it’s addressed so much at people’s sexuality, it’s just the nature of their talk’. However, he also spoke passionately on how this language is challenged at the College: ‘I think staff are quite vigilant and there is...not so much a zero-tolerance [approach], but I would say staff monitor it quite a lot’. Abbie, a bisexual senior manager at the College, supported the notion of challenging the language: ‘Unfortunately, we can’t tell if it is meant in a negative way or if people will be offended, so we just try to challenge it all. We’re not having people feel uncomfortable or unsafe in college’.

However, while this approach is intended to facilitate the college’s overall inclusivity, the students themselves—including those who are openly LGB—accept it and interpret it as central to their everyday discourse. Nonetheless, it remains an example of how teachers and

staff at Newcombe College are attempting to eradicate anything they deem will have a deleterious effect on LGB students—regardless of the effectiveness of their approach.

Inclusive college culture

There were many components of Newcombe College that students and staff described as contributing to an inclusive culture. Specifically, both staff and students suggested that the college environment was more inclusive than school. Tom, for example, an openly gay head of department, said that, ‘LGB is recognised and talked about here, whereas...in school, people are not always comfortable doing that’. Similarly, Eddie, a bisexual male support staff member, said that, ‘I used to work in a secondary school and there was no discussion of anything related to LGB rights there’.

For students, this lack of discussion in schools was attributed to a lack of maturity among peers. Gabby, for example, an openly lesbian student, said that, ‘I definitely notice a difference here because I had a horrible time at school. Kids just didn’t want to be dealing with it’. Similarly, Julia, a heterosexual female student, said that, ‘If the boys were flamboyant in school, they were bullied by other kids’. Oliver acknowledged the presence of mature students in the college environment as positively impacting the inclusivity of LGB students. Thus, the sexual diversity of college was deemed as more positive than the experiences in school, particularly when it came to openness and inclusion (Riley, 2010).

Some students provided examples of the school-college distinction. Tracey, an openly lesbian student, recalled a time when she was prevented from setting up an LGBT society at her school because teachers believed it would ‘cause more problems’. She said, ‘I don’t know what the kids would’ve been like, but the teachers just stopped all my attempts to set a society up’. Another similar contrast was brought by Jimmy, who said, ‘I got thrown in a river, I got a log thrown at my face, and I got punched. This is like going from fighting lions to playing with kittens’.

Others discussed the consequences of living in a small, rural village—where ethnic and sexual diversity is quite limited—leading students to feel secluded, thus affecting the way they presented themselves. In contrast, Newcombe College is situated in the centre of a major city, with a higher number and more diverse range of attendees. Samuel, for example, said that, ‘It was a little school in a secluded area where everyone knows everyone’s business. Being here [Newcombe] is better because it’s more diverse and accepting’. Similarly, Jimmy spoke of his experiences in a ‘little matchbox village’ where things were ‘set in their ways’. As such, attitudes towards sexual minorities were very conservative, but ‘at college, people are much better and can be trusted’.

LGB Visibility

The inclusive culture of the college was also evidenced by frequent open expressions of gay identity among students. Simon, for example, an openly gay teacher, spoke of the frequency with which gay couples hold hands when walking around campus between lessons. Mark, a heterosexual male student, said that, ‘I’ve seen gay and lesbian couples around campus together, just as I see straight couples holding hands. Nobody has any issues’. And Chloe, a lesbian student, mentioned two lesbian girls in her class: ‘Jess and Becky, a cute couple I know, always sit next to each other and hold hands under the table. It’s really sweet’.

Moreover, the college also uses the campus and staff to actively promote LGB inclusivity, and challenge any homophobic behaviour. Heterosexual support worker, Joshua, spoke of the use of rainbow lanyards for staff and student identification cards, in addition to numerous posters displayed in numerous areas on the main campus. He said that he had witnessed ‘an encouraging response’ among students to the positive discussions of LGB rights. Julia, a heterosexual student, confirmed this response, stating that, ‘The posters definitely help because it shows everyone that this is an accepting college’.

LGBT history month is also a big event for Newcombe College, and many of the students and staff raise its awareness through a range of initiatives, thus ensuring that the college is sexually inclusive. Here, a range of events are run by LGB students, and external guest speakers visit the college to discuss various issues related to the LGBT community. Although students were positive and enthusiastic about these events, three teachers raised concerns that the college was appearing ‘too tokenistic’ and that these events were ‘in danger of being a tick-box exercise’. Tom, for example, was sceptical of its longevity: ‘We only have a month of activities but after that, it all dissipates until the following year’. However, even if this were the case, the mere presence of LGBT posters advertising events still represents a shift towards one of inclusivity, especially given the positive attitudes among students, and that heteronormative curricula—such as Section 28—were only abolished as recently as 2003.

Discussion

LGB people in British education have traditionally been subjected to higher levels of victimisation, harassment and discrimination (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Salisbury & Jackson, 1996). But over the last two decades, homophobia has significantly declined in British culture (Clements & Field, 2014)—and across other parts of the Western world, too (Twenge et al., 2016). This has especially been the case among younger cohort, and recent research has found adolescents espousing more positive attitudes towards sexual diversity in British education (Blanchard et al., 2017; McCormack, 2012a; White & Hobson, 2017).

This research, based in an FE college in an affluent city in the south of England, is consistent with other recent research in this area. The LGB youth that we interviewed are unanimously accepted and supported by their peers. Indeed, none of the 15 LGB students or 9 staff had neither experienced nor witnessed overt homophobia in their current educational context. Instead, much like McCormack’s (2012a, 2014) research, it is clear that, in this college, homophobia is stigmatised, rather than homosexuality.

The inclusive culture at Newcombe College is further evidenced in that the LGB staff were ‘out’, albeit to varying levels. All LGB staff were openly ‘out’, yet some outlined that they were selective in who this information was disclosed to. This was based on the perceived levels of students’ maturity, and viewing the private and professional sphere as separate (Jackson, 2006; Rofes, 2000; Wardle, 2009). However, the majority of LGB staff discussed their sexual identities openly, in a manner similar to students at the college.

Further illustrating the inclusivity of Newcombe College is the changing dynamics of homosexually-themed language. Historically, one of the main concerns of sexually diverse demographics in British education is use of anti-gay language (Plummer, 1999; Thurlow,

2001). However, as cultural homophobia has declined, so too has the use of homosexually-themed language to wound LGB people (see McCormack, 2011). Indeed, participants in our research, however, both staff and students, suggested that homosexually-themed language was complex—and rarely employed with intent to wound (Magrath, 2017b). Instead, it served two main purposes: first, a means of friends' bonding, such as the phrase 'fag hag' to affectionately describe a female student; or second, it served as a 'cathartic expression of dissatisfaction' (McCormack, 2012, p. 116).

Interestingly, however, staff at Newcombe College approached homosexually-themed language with caution. While most staff recognised students' routine use of this language as harmless, they were also keen to implement the college's 'zero-tolerance' approach to discrimination. It is also perhaps evidence of what we describe as 'intergenerational interpretations' of homosexually-themed language; where older generations interpret language differently compared to younger generations. Nevertheless, it is evidence of how staff are striving to ensure that Newcombe College represents an inclusive environment for all students—regardless of their sexual identities.

Such findings—alongside the promotion of various events, such as LGBT history month—illustrate how British education has evolved into a more inclusive environment than ever before. Indeed, where policies like Section 28 prohibited the promotion of homosexuality, effectively erasing any dialogue whatsoever (Nixon & Givens, 2007), we are now seeing an erasure of uncomfortable staff discussions of homosexuality—and more open displays of LGBT issues.

In hearing the narratives of nine LGB staff, we are also able to recognise that declining homophobia also impacts the lives of older generations, too. Whereas most of the previous scholarship on inclusive masculinities has primarily focused on adolescent and emerging adults (c.f. Dashper, 2012; Magrath, 2017b), this research has included a variety of older demographics. Significantly, when research has focused on older demographics, there has been often found to be a cohort effect on their experiences (McCormack et al., 2015). At Newcombe College, we found staff to have similar positive experiences to LGB students. This, we argue, is at least partially a result of the college environment being dominated by young people who embody inclusive masculinities (Anderson, 2014).

Due to the relatively small sample size of this research, it is not possible to generalise to the broader population of LGB students or staff across the country. Indeed, the very nature of our research design may have led only to the recruitment of students who are most confident and open regarding their sexual orientation. Moreover, most of our sample were White; there may be more complex narratives concerning the experiences of ethnic minority LGB students and staff (see Magrath, 2017c)—or those who hail from religious minorities (Morales, 2017). Naturally, there may also be various geographical differences—both local and international which impact the acceptance of LGB people—as demonstrated in more rural areas earlier in this article.

Nevertheless, this research still offers an important perspective on the experiences of LGB students and staff in British education. These findings, alongside the increasingly growing body of inclusive masculinities scholarship, are evidence of the positive narrative that is becoming commonplace among younger generations of the LGB population

(Anderson et al., 2016; Magrath, 2017a). It is also evidence of a positive climate for LGB teachers and staff, who remain closeted in large numbers in the UK (Wardle, 2009).

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¹While we recognise that lesbian, gay and bisexual is usually also accompanied by trans (e.g. LGBT), in this article we largely omit trans theorising, as we prefer to focus on the experiences of sexual minorities rather than gender minorities.