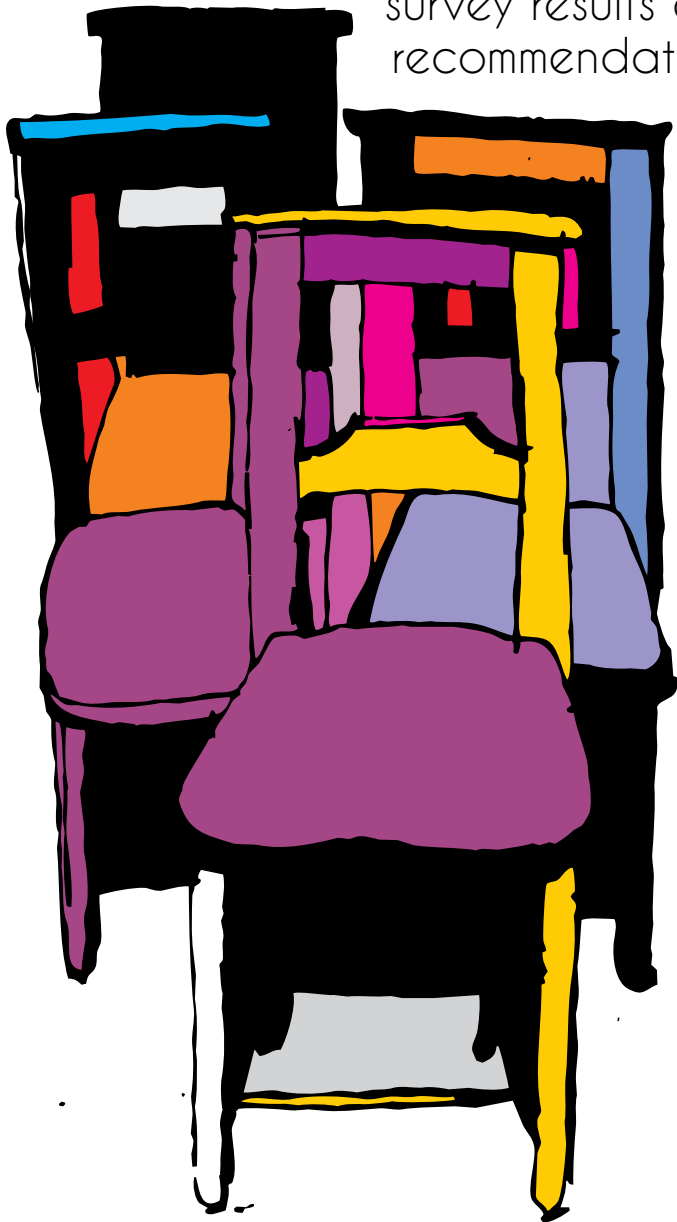


HOMOPHOBIC BULLYING

in Lithuanian schools:
survey results and
recommendations



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HOMOPHOBIC BULLYING – SUMMARY

Bullying is currently one of the most pressing issues in schools. In comparison to other European countries, this problem was addressed relatively recently in Lithuania. The statistics indicate that Lithuania should urgently respond to this problem. According to the World Health Organization, Lithuania has the highest prevalence of bullying among pupils in Europe¹. In 2010, the organization “Save the Children” estimated that as many as half of the children attending school experience bullying.

Bullying based on sexual orientation remains an unrecognized problem in Lithuania. It is important to note that this type of behavior is enacted not only against gay people, but against bisexual and transgender individuals also. Homophobic and transphobic bullying primarily targets sensitive and shy teenage boys, sporty girls, and any children who do not meet the stereotypical image of a boy or girl. People whose family members or acquaintances are homosexual, bisexual or transgender also face such mistreatment. Anybody, even heterosexual people, may be subject to discrimination, harassment and violence. A variety of commonly used Lithuanian swear words, such as “lesbo”, “fag” or “homo”, are considered to be among the most humiliating insults that exist, regardless of the sexual orientation of the person being taunted. Such remarks reinforce a negative image of homosexual people by virtue of the fact that being called gay or lesbian is considered an insult.

¹ Young people’s health in context: Health behavior in school aged children (HBSC) study: international report from 2001/2002 survey. World Health Organization, 2003. <http://www.who.int/immunization/hpv/target/young_peoples_health_in_context_who_2011_2012.pdf>

The number of programs and projects aimed at reducing the amount of children suffering from bullying and violence in Lithuania is growing. Although such programs cover most forms of bullying, the subjects of homophobic bullying, tolerance and respect for LGBT* people (abbreviation used to denote lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people) are rarely discussed during the workshops addressing bullying.

As reported in the Eurobarometer's survey, 81% of LGBT* people in Lithuania hide their LGBT* identity in school². In 2012, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights estimated that 84% of LGBT* people in Lithuania never spoke about their sexual orientation in school, while 79% actively concealed information about being gay or bisexual³. Only 33% of respondents said that they have never heard negative comments and never experienced discrimination in relation to his/her sexuality.

Bullying based on sexual orientation should be given special attention. Considering the extent of homophobia in Lithuanian society, the struggle to tackle bullying based on sexual orientation is more complex than for other types of abuse. The Lithuanian media's coverage of topics related to the LGBT* community is rarely positive. Moreover, The Law of the Republic of Lithuania on the Protection of Minors Against the Detrimental Effect of Public Information came into force on March 1, 2010, thereby making it complicated and often impossible to display non-heterosexual relationships in the public sphere. This limitation of information makes it difficult to objectively perceive the diversity of reality. It distorts young people's worldviews and promotes the formation of various misconceptions, stereotypes and negative attitudes concerning LGBT* people.

The negative information about the LGBT* community conveyed by the media incites students to bully gay and bisexual classmates and to use derogatory remarks intended to insult gay or bisexual persons.

² Eurobarometer 393: Discrimination in the eu in 2012. Report. 2012. <http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_393_en.pdf>

³ EU LGBT survey data explorer (online). FRA, 2013. <<http://fra.europa.eu/en/lgbt-survey-results>>

On November 25, 2014 the Union of Lithuanian Psychologists issued a statement claiming that the ban to speak in public about stigma-related difficulties and discrimination faced by LGBT* people is in itself detrimental to minors⁴. The Union says the hostile anti-gay stance is harmful to children and constitutes one of the suicide risk factors among teenagers in Lithuania.

⁴ Lithuanian psychologists say censoring information on LGBT* issues does harm to minors. <<http://www.lgl.lt/en/news/lgbt-guide-lt/lithuanian-psychologists-say-censoring-information-lgbt-issues-harm-minors/>>

SURVEY 1: TEACHERS' ATTITUDES ON HOMOPHOBIC BULLYING

Introduction

Data from various countries throughout the world show that school is the place where displays of homophobic bullying are especially evident⁵. Negative attitudes toward LGBT* people prevail in society, and are communicated to children in school and by the teachers who educate them.

Teachers are a part of the public who face young people every day, making their influence to pupils undeniable. Unfortunately, in Lithuania, the topic of LGBT* students is not addressed during the training to become a teacher. Moreover, homophobic bullying is not an explicit part of bullying prevention programs. Therefore, it is important to find out how teachers perceive the problem of homophobia and related bullying, and to learn about how they handle these issues in their schools. In clarifying teachers' attitudes, knowledge and needs, educational programs and methodological materials may be developed to help them address this form of bullying.

The purpose of this study is to assess teachers' attitudes regarding homophobia and homophobic bullying. This study also aims to learn about teachers' needs and their experience with the issue of homophobia in their daily work.

⁵ Good policy and practice in HIV and health education – Booklet 8: Education sector responses to homophobic bullying. UNESCO, 2012

Methodology

A questionnaire was developed to achieve the goal of this study. The development of the questionnaire was based on various studies carried out in different countries to determine the prevalence of homophobic bullying in schools. The questionnaires were distributed in October and November of 2014.

The questionnaire consisted of 11 questions. Most of the questions were closed, but almost every question provided the possibility to submit a comment or an individualized answer. The last question was open and gave teachers the opportunity to leave a comment and share their thoughts on any topic related to homophobia. It was not necessary to answer all the questions in order to complete the questionnaire.

A request to fill out an electronic version of the questionnaire was sent to middle schools and high schools via e-mail. An announcement was posted in a group that brings together teachers of different subjects on the social networking site “Facebook”. Several teachers in Vilnius also distributed the questionnaire to their colleagues.

Respondents

136 teachers from 22 to 65 years of age (average age mean - 42.3 years (SD = 10.84)) took part in the study. The vast majority of respondents were female (89%). Most of the teachers reported living in urban areas (41.2%), and slightly less live in metropolitan areas (39.7%). 18.4% of teachers stated that they live in rural areas.

Almost half of the teachers (47%) said that they do not personally know even one LGBT* person, 27% know a few, 16% claimed they know one LGBT* person, and 10% do not know whether they know an LGBT* person or not.

Results

- 57.4% of teachers stated that homophobic bullying does not occur at their school. Only 11% of teachers acknowledged that they have experienced an incident of homophobic bullying at their school.
- According to the teachers, verbal bullying based on sexual orientation can be witnessed more often in school.
- Almost a quarter of teachers (23.3%) said that verbal bullying based on presumed or actual sexual orientation occurs often or very often. Physical bullying is less reported; only 9% of teachers claim that it occurs often or very often.
- Nearly two-thirds of teachers said that they do not know whether homosexual or bisexual students study in their school. A quarter of respondents answered this question negatively, and only 10% of teachers said that non-heterosexual students are studying in their school.
- Over 17% of respondents would not want to have a homosexual or bisexual student in their class and/or would feel uncomfortable in his/her presence. The vast majority of teachers (67.6%) claim that such students do not cause any problems, but the teachers do not consider it beneficial to open up about one's sexual orientation in school. Only 17.6% of teachers say that such revelations are welcome and that they would support such students in their class.
- Speaking of how they would react upon witnessing an incident of homophobic bullying, the majority of teachers responded that they would speak with the individuals responsible for the event, and 32.4% would speak with their parents. 16.9% of respondents answered that they would not respond directly, but would report the event to leadership. Only 5.1% would punish the perpetrators, and 2.9% would ignore the event.

- Regarding the question about the factors interfering with addressing bullying related to sexual orientation in school, 45.6% of teachers responded that they do not have these problems in school, so it is not necessary to fight against them. One-third of respondents cited the scarcity of news and experience addressing this type of bullying as the reason. One-fourth of teachers believe that sexual education in school would help resolve the issue. 19.1% blame the country's political situation for the problem of homophobia. Only 2.9% of teachers believe that there is no place in school for discussing the topic of homophobic bullying.
- Speaking about how teachers try to resolve the problem of homophobic bullying, more than half of respondents (51.5%) said that they do not have such issues at their schools, so they do not have to resolve them. 41.2% of teachers said that they lack the necessary expertise, and that this problem should be resolved by specialists such as psychologists and social workers. Only slightly more than 8% of respondents shared their experiences trying to address this concern.
- Unfortunately, the majority of the teachers' stated methods for conflict resolution did not relate to the elimination of bullying and coercion in school, which reflects a rather stereotypical, homophobic view of the issue. This was also reflected in the comments left after the questionnaire.
- The teachers' comments at the end of the survey allow one to conclude that a portion of the individuals working in schools has very negative provisions for the consideration of homosexual and bisexual persons.
- The teachers' comments also reflected a notable shortage of knowledge regarding the LGBT* community and the obstacles it faces.

Findings

To summarize, it can be said that the majority of teachers do not recognize the problem of homophobic bullying in schools.

The fact that only one tenth of teachers said they know that homosexual and bisexual students study in their school is concerning. According to the statistics, one or two non-heterosexual students may be studying in each class. The lack of awareness that LGBT* students are studying in every school could be related to the fact that teachers do not notice and/or underestimate the threats of homophobic bullying and homophobic language, that they do not recognize the problem, or that they do not have the motivation to fight it.

In this context, the fact that the majority of teachers said that they very rarely notice homophobic bullying or are not aware of such incidents at their school is not surprising.

Slightly less than one-fifth of teachers support the disclosure of sexual orientation at their school and say that students should feel safe enough to reveal such information about themselves. More than half of teachers believe that school is not the place to talk about one's sexual orientation. Such an approach does not allow most students to feel safe enough to be themselves at school.

An alarming fact is that almost half of surveyed teachers felt that there is no need to deal with homophobic bullying because there is no such problem at their schools. In order to effectively overcome the issue of homophobic bullying in the field of education, it is necessary to recognize both the existence and the scale of this issue.

One-third of teachers admit that they lack knowledge and experience in dealing with the issue of homophobic bullying in schools. Therefore, it is important to provide training to teachers and other school personnel on how to recognize and appropriately respond to bullying based on sexual orientation. One-quarter of teachers think that sex education in school would help to address this problem.

Almost every fifth teacher believed that the issue of homophobic bullying is complicated by the political situation regarding LGBT* people in the country. The Law on the Protection of Minors Against the Detrimental Effect of Public Information was adopted in 2010, thus making it complicated and often completely impossible to display any positive information about LGBT* people in the public sphere. This limitation on information prevented many initiatives aimed at improving the lives of LGBT* people). As we know, stereotypes and hostile attitudes stem from uncertainty, so the ban of positive information about non-heterosexual persons further promotes the spread of stereotypes in society.

An analysis of teachers' responses and comments suggests that the attitudes of teachers may be partially formed by the media, which often negatively portrays LGBT-related events and provides misleading information about LGBT* community. It was also observed that teachers severely lack information about LGBT-related issues.

SURVEY 2: THE ATTITUDES OF YOUNG GAY AND BISEXUAL PERSONS IN RESPECT OF HOMOPHOBIC BULLYING

Introduction

The main objective of this study was to reveal the teachers' attitudes about homophobic bullying and the challenges they face in fighting against this form of hostility. However, it is impossible to determine the actual extent of this problem without listening to the victims of homophobic bullying. Therefore, it is vital to learn about the experiences, needs and views of non-heterosexual students on this matter and, in doing so, to plan specific interventions and solutions to this problem. This study was designed to complement the state of homophobic bullying issue in Lithuanian schools as described by the teachers.

Methodology

A questionnaire was designed to achieve the goal of this study. The development of the questionnaire was based on various studies about homophobic

bullying in schools carried out in different countries. The questionnaire consisted of 16 questions. Most of the questions were closed, but almost every question provided the possibility to leave a comment. The last question was strictly open and in answering it, LGBT* youth were able to share their personal experiences and stories related to incidents of homophobic bullying in their schools. It was not necessary to answer all the questions to complete the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was designed for homosexual and bisexual students, and first-year university students. The questionnaire was distributed via groups for LGBT* people on the social networking site “Facebook”. Volunteers at LGBT* rights organizations also contributed to the distribution of the questionnaire. 49 completed questionnaires were collected. Information about the study and an application to complete a questionnaire were sent to all users from 16 to 20 years of age on the website gayline.lt. 117 online responses were received. Questionnaires were distributed in November and December of 2014.

Respondents

152 respondents participated in the study. More than half of the students who took part in the study were male - 85 (56% of respondents). 67 (44%) respondents were women. The youngest respondent was 14 years old and the oldest was 20. The average age was 17.7 years (SD = 1.46).

More than two-thirds of students who took part in the study (102 persons) were homosexual (67%), and 50 respondents were bisexual (33%). 68 gay students (44.7% of all respondents) and 34 lesbian students (22.4%) participated in the study. 17 respondents were bisexual young men (11.2%) and 33 were young women (21.7%).

The vast majority of young men in the study were homosexual (80% of young men). Out of the young women, 50.7% were lesbian and 49.3% were bisexual.

According to the information concerning their place of residence, most respondents (75%) stated that they live in big cities (over 100 thousand inhabitants), with 22% living in cities and 3% in rural areas.

Results

- 24% of students feel safe or very safe regarding their sexual orientation in school. Over 30% of LGBT* students feel partially or totally unsafe at school. Girls feel safer regarding their sexual orientation at school than boys.
- Most students (52%) hide their sexual orientation in school and only come out to the people they are closest to. 19% of respondents stated that nobody in school knows about their sexual orientation. About 15% of respondents speak about their sexuality to other students and teachers, and about 13% only speak to fellow students.
- When asked about who they feel is most vulnerable to homophobic bullying in school, the majority of respondents enlisted “girlish” boys, students believed to be homosexual or bisexual, and students who do not hide their homosexual or bisexual orientation.
- 79% of the students who responded faced bullying based on their sexual orientation in school. Only 21% of respondents claimed that they never or almost never experienced the listed forms of bullying.
- According to the students, they face verbal harassment more often than physical bullying. The most common forms of bullying are slander (often or almost daily experienced by 43.2% of the respondents), jokes (35.3%), name-calling (23.6%), and teasing (21.5%). Less common forms of bullying are taking personal belongings (87.6% of the respondents have never or almost never experienced it), pushing

(78.5%), threats (75.2%) and intimidation (73.2%). 71.9% of the respondents never or almost never received annoying text or social networking messages.

- Regarding what kind of reaction students expect from their teachers who notice an incident of homophobic bullying, 37% of students believe that teachers would talk to the person who provoked the event. Almost a third (31%) of students were certain that the teacher would ignore such an incident.
- 64% of students said that they would be able to defend themselves in the event of being bullied. Nearly a third of students answered that they would not be able to cope with bullying on their own. Compared to girls, boys more often conceded that they would not be able to defend themselves in case of bullying.
- 42.1% of students said that they would turn to their friends in the event of homophobic bullying. One third of respondents have never felt a need for such aid, so they could not say to whom they could turn. 16.4% would consult with a psychologist or a reliable teacher. 15.1% of students do not know whom they would seek help from. Over 12 percent of students have nobody to consult with and therefore feel alone in such situations.
- The vast majority of the students polled (76%) believe that the problem of homophobia in school would be tackled through sex education, and many (62%) believed that other activities covering LGBT* issues in school would also help. Slightly more than half of the students believe that their school lacks of clear rules about how to respond to bullying based on sexual orientation. 11% of pupils do not think that it is possible to solve this complex problem.

Findings

An analysis of the answers given by homosexual and bisexual students revealed that bullying based on sexual orientation is a common issue in schools. More than one-third of students who took part in the study stated that they feel unsafe at school, and more than half of them revealed their sexual orientation only to the people closest to them.

Bullying based on sexual orientation is faced by eight out of ten surveyed students. Homosexual and bisexual students primarily faced verbal bullying. Homophobic language is very common and often incites bullying based on sexual orientation. However, the fact that most non-heterosexual students have experienced name-calling, teasing or jokes based on sexual orientation should alarm all adults who work with youth. Homophobic language, especially when ignored by teachers and other school personnel, provokes stereotypes and negative attitudes towards LGBT* people, and enables students to discriminate against non-heterosexual persons and those who do not reflect to the stereotypical image of a man or a woman.

According to the majority of students, homophobic bullying is experienced not only by openly homosexual or bisexual individuals, but also by youth who does not conform to normative gender stereotypes, and by students and teachers who are merely believed to be non-heterosexual. This finding supports the argument that homosexual and bisexual youth are not the only ones who suffer from homophobic bullying; a large part of the school community might experience this problem as well.

Recommendations

- **Teacher education.** One of the main conclusions from the research was the discrepancy between how teachers perceive the situation and what the students actually experience. One of the most cru-

cial initiatives to be undertaken is educating teachers about various LGBT-related themes. Teachers must realize that LGBT* youth is present in their schools, and that homosexuality/ bisexuality/ transgenderism is neither a disease nor a choice. It is extremely important that teachers understand what non-heterosexual youth lives through and experiences in school, at home and in other social spaces. It is also very important to educate teachers about how they can help this group of students.

- **Incorporation of homophobic bullying into the general anti-bullying program.** Ignoring this topic when speaking about bullying and violence at school enables students to taunt LGBT* people. It is essential to clearly show that no type of bullying will be tolerated, and to speak about the fact that LGBT* people are a vulnerable social group, and that discrimination against them will not be accepted.
- **Incorporation of LGBT topics into lesson plans.** Speaking with students about the LGBT* community and its significant members throughout various classes in school positively impacts LGBT* students; it allows them to feel that their sexual orientation is not exceptional, and that they are normal and accepted. Information about significant people who also are not heterosexual helps these students to believe in themselves and their potential, and provides them with a positive example that they can identify with and follow. At the same time, such discussions help heterosexual youth to get used to the fact that society is very diverse, which heightens their tolerance for members of discriminated groups. Additionally, information about prominent people's stated sexual orientation provides a platform for the discussion of LGBT* issues and discrimination.
- **Sexual education.** One of the main obstacles when resolving any type of problem relating to sex is the shortage of sexual education in school. Students have the right to knowledge-based information about one of the most important aspects of a person's life - sexual-

ity. Sexual education lessons would help to reduce rates of sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy amongst teenagers. Various topics relating to sexual education would also contribute to the growth of tolerance and respect between LGBT* individuals and their heterosexual peers.

- **Dissemination of positive information about the LGBT* community.**
- **Creation of support and informational systems for students.** Young LGBT* students often raise a lot of questions. They have the right to meaningful information and to peers or adults with whom they can speak. It is very important to guarantee that students have sources of information to help them to make safe choices. It is necessary to provide students with exhaustive, reliable information. It is crucial that they know where they can turn to in the event of bullying, and with whom they can speak about LGBT-related questions. Furthermore, it is important that school libraries contain publications that provide answers to the questions and concerns of young LGBT* students, such as those pertaining to sexual orientation, coming out, and relationships.

HOMOPHOBIC BULLYING in Lithuanian schools: survey results and recommendations

Schools are required to provide all young people with a safe and favourable learning environment. However, bullying remains an acute problem that has the potential to affect every student. The students most often harmed by bullying are those who differ from their peers, and especially those who belong to groups stigmatized by society - lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT*) young people.

In Lithuania, bullying on the basis of sexual orientation remains a relatively unrecognized problem. This publication serves as the first step in trying to resolve the issue of homophobic bullying. Its purpose is to shed light on the nature of homophobic bullying and its prevalence in schools throughout the country, and to provide teachers and specialists who work with youth with the information and skills they need to fight against violence in educational environments.

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