

SUPPORTING LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL AND TRANSGENDER STUDENTS: THE ROLE OF GUIDANCE COUNSELLORS

This supplement should be read in conjunction with the DES/GLEN Guidance for Principals and School Leaders.

*Click here to download a copy. (http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobServlet/guidance_for_principals_school_leaders.pdf?language=EN)

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Introduction

This supplement outlining the role of the guidance counsellor in supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students has been produced by GLEN – Gay and Lesbian Equality Network for the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE). We are extremely grateful to the Institute of Guidance Counsellors and individual Guidance Counsellors for reviewing and contributing to this supplement prior to publication.

Background – Why this Supplement?

In recent years there has been greater attention paid to issues related to sexual orientation in second level schools. There is widespread recognition that homophobic bullying is a serious issue with the potential to have very harmful impacts on those who experience it, regardless of their sexual orientation. There is also recognition that generic name-calling and use of words such as

‘gay’ as pejorative terms of abuse have become commonplace in many schools. Guidance counsellors are often at the centre of the schools’ response to dealing with these issues.

This supplement aims to offer advice to guidance counsellors as they support lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students; address homophobic bullying and name-calling and contribute to creating and maintaining schools as safe, supportive and affirming places for all students regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

These guidelines relate primarily to lesbian, gay and bisexual students. Sexual orientation and gender identity issues are distinct but are related in terms of experiences of “coming out”, bullying and discrimination. Specific information for the Guidance Counsellor on Transgender issues is available from Transgender Equality Network Ireland (www.teni.ie).

Existing Department of Education and Skills Resources

The Department of Education and Skills in conjunction with GLEN (Gay and Lesbian Equality Network) has issued all second level schools with Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Students: Guidance for Principals and School Leaders*, which provides valuable information on issues such as;

- Emerging sexual orientation identity in adolescence;
- ‘Coming out’;
- Homophobic bullying;
- Working with other staff members and parents on sexual orientation issues;
- Inclusion of lesbian, gay and bisexual students in school policy.

Working with Policy: The Guidance Plan

Two essential policy documents should lead work on the Guidance Plan, these are as follows:

- The Department of Education and Skills Guidelines for Second Level Schools on the Implications of Section 9 (c) of the Education Act 1998 relating to students' access to appropriate guidance suggest that the guidance plan should, where possible be led by the guidance counsellor/s. The Guidelines highlight that the National Development Plan (2000-2006) identifies that the school guidance service plays a major preventative role in helping young people at risk to remain in the formal education system. Download here:

http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobServlet/pp_guidelines_second_level_schools_9c.pdf?language=EN

- NCGE’s publication, Planning the School Guidance Programme provides the guidance counsellor, school management and interested parties with a comprehensive aid to understanding, developing and implementing a school’s guidance plan. Download here: http://www.ncge.ie/reports/Pl_Sch_Gui_prog_leaf.pdf

The Guidance plan is a critical policy area in identifying student needs; this is particularly relevant to those with special educational needs, minority ethnic groups and those at risk of early school leaving. Recent research has shown that a significant proportion of LGBT young people will miss school due to fear of victimisation on the basis of their LGBT identity and some will not complete school as a result. An experience of victimisation at school is a contributory factor in placing a significant sub-group of young LGBT people at risk of suicidality. Consequently the needs of LGBT young people should be taken into account within the Guidance Plan.

In the DES / GLEN Guidance for Principals and School Leaders it is suggested the guidance plan sets out school procedures in responding to a student who ‘comes out’, a list of suggestions are provided as to the shape of such a policy (see page 13). These include;

- Identifying relevant resources and supports;
- Identifying key individuals who can be of support to the student;
- Consulting with the young person on what his/her needs are, if any;
- Advising other staff members on how they should respond;
- Review and reinforcement of the school's Anti-Bully policy and Code of Behaviour.

Working with Individual Students

The guidance counsellor is often the person that a student may choose to tell they are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. Guidance counsellors should reassure a student that they will treat information confidentially as long as he/she is not at risk. Guidance for Principals and School Leaders deals with 'coming out' in more detail (see pages 9-10); some general points are repeated here:

- Schools should communicate a message to LGB young people that they are valued equally; will be treated equally to other students, and that the school leadership will ensure their safety and support. It is critical that a young LGB person discovering their sexual orientation feels supported and valued, regardless of whether or not they disclose their sexual orientation.
- When a young person 'comes out' as lesbian, gay, bisexual, they are disclosing their sexual orientation and identity. It is important that this is not

interpreted as a statement of engagement in sexual behaviour. However, the advice given in the Child Protection Guidelines relating to sexual activity applies to all students regardless of their sexual orientation. <http://www.education.ie/home/home.jsp?maincat=&pcategory=10815&category=33807§ionpage=12251&language=EN&link=link001&page=1&doc=32089>

Please Note: The legal age of consent in Ireland is 17 for boys and girls for heterosexual and homosexual sex.

- Only if school authorities have legitimate cause for concern for the student's safety should engagement with the student's parents be made. Often a young person experiences intense fear of rejection by his/her family and consequently finds it easier to 'come out' to others first. A positive experience 'coming out' to others, where they are met with acceptance is critical to safeguarding the young person's mental health and well-being; it can also lessen the fear of the young person eventually disclosing to his/her family and friends. (Maycock et al, 2009)

Some general points for guidance counsellors in working with LGBT students

- Many guidance counsellors feel that
- they are not experts on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) issues. LGBT issues are like all other issues which involve people's life experience in that, each person's experience is unique and it is that experience that ought to be the

guiding principle in a counselling situation. You can however broaden your knowledge and understanding of the issues experienced by LGBT people in general – a number of useful sources are available here. <http://www.glen.ie/education.html>

- Demonstrate that you are open to talking about LGBT issues by displaying posters and information with LGBT content. Most LGBT students will see this as an indication that you are positively disposed to LGBT people. Posters and other materials are available from BeLonG To Youth Services.
- Guidance counsellors should be aware of professional bias which might take the form of pathologising (seeing someone's LGBT identity as a disorder or a problem as opposed to part of someone's identity); stereotyping (assuming someone is LGBT because they look/act/speak in a certain way); stigmatising (attaching shame to LGBT identity). Guidance counsellors should provide support in a sensitive way.
- Avoid the assumption that the student is going through a phase or is too young to know that they are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.
- Ensure that you have up to date contacts and information available which will enable you to provide constructive and meaningful support – (Guidance for Principals and School Leaders page 24 & 25).
- If you are unsure of something ask an LGBT person, most will be happy to clarify your understanding. Equally, it is ok to say 'I don't know, but I'll try to find out' or 'I may not be saying this in the most appropriate way, so please correct me if I'm wrong...'
- If a young person is referred to you because they have experienced homophobic bullying don't assume they are LGBT but focus on the bullying rather than the young person's identity. Provide opportunities for him/her to tell you that they are LGBT if this is the case.

If you think a student may be LGBT and would like to talk to you about it but is not being direct, the following may help:

- Explain that your role is to support students in all aspects of their experience in school – personal, social, educational and career.
- Reassure the student that they can talk to you about anything that is affecting them at school. Tell the student that the service you provide is confidential and you would only need to inform the Principal or parents if you believe his or her safety to be at risk.
- Reassure the student that you try not to judge anyone and you have a lot of experience working with students around lots of different issues.

- Assure the student that if you are not able to offer support you will find the appropriate support.
- If you consider the situation appropriate you could make an open ended statement, such as “many young people go through difficult times when they are confused about different issues, my job is to provide him/her with the support he/she needs”.
- As in all other situations if the student does not open up, after you have provided the opportunity to do so, do not ask the student about their LGBT identity, unless they first ‘come out’.

If a student comes out to you in a one-to-one situation

Coming out is an important time in LGBT people’s lives and asking a student about their experience of coming out demonstrates your understanding of their situation; ways of asking include;

- “Do any of your friends know you are gay?”
- “Have you come out to your family?”
- “How have things been since you came out?”
- “Who/what has helped you in the coming out process?”
- “Have you had any positive/negative experiences since coming out?”

- “Are there any issues you would like to discuss with me related to your sexual orientation?”

Other relevant areas that could be explored include:

- What the student may have heard others say either directly/indirectly about being LGBT; explore positive, negative and neutral messages they may have received in this way.
- How he/she feels about their sexual orientation or gender identity.
- The level of acceptance of LGBT identity; he/she may be in the very initial stages of ‘coming out’ and may not have fully accepted his/her sexual orientation or gender identity; it is important therefore that this is dealt with sensitively.
- Discuss what supports/social network the student has – including other LGBT people.

Terms and Definitions

Lesbian: A lesbian woman is one who is romantically, sexually and/or emotionally attracted to women. Many lesbians prefer to be called lesbian rather than gay.

Gay: A gay man is one who is romantically, sexually and/or emotionally attracted to men. The word gay can be used to refer generally to lesbian, gay and bisexual people but many women prefer to be called lesbian. Most gay people don't like to be referred to as homosexual because of the negative historical associations with this word and because the word gay better reflects their identity.

Bisexual: A bisexual person is someone who is romantically, sexually and/or emotionally attracted to people of both sexes.

Transgender or Trans is an umbrella term used to describe people whose gender identity (internal feeling of being male or female) and/or gender expression, differs from that associated with their birth sex. Not everyone whose appearance or behaviour is gender-atypical will identify as a transgender person. Many transgender people live part-time or full-time in another gender. Transgender people can identify as transsexual, transvestite or another gender identity.

Gender Identity: One's gender identity refers to whether one feels male, female or transgender (regardless of one's biological sex). Gender expression refers

to outwardly expressing one's gender identity.

Sexual Orientation refers to an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to men, women, or both sexes. Sexual orientation also refers to a person's sense of identity based on those attractions, related behaviours, and membership in a community of others who share those attractions. Three sexual orientations are commonly recognised – heterosexual, homosexual (gay and lesbian) and bisexual.

Homophobia refers to fear of or prejudice and discrimination against lesbian, gay and bisexual people. It is also the dislike of same-sex attraction and love or the hatred of people who have those feelings. The term was first used in the 1970s and is more associated with ignorance, prejudice and stereotyping than with the physiological reactions usually attributed to a 'phobia'. While homophobic comments or attitudes are often unintentional, they can cause hurt and offence to lesbian, gay and bisexual people.

Transphobia refers to fear of or prejudice and discrimination against people who are transgender or who are perceived to transgress norms of gender, gender identity or gender expression. While transphobic comments or attitudes are often unintentional, they can cause hurt and offence to transgender people.

Other Resources and Information

In addition to the resources identified in these guidelines the following resources may be of benefit. All are available from GLEN's website www.glen.ie

Guidelines & Resources

Addressing Homophobia: Guidelines for the Youth Sector in Ireland. Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and BeLonG To Youth Services.

Department of Education & Science and GLEN. *Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Students: Guidance for Principals and School Leaders.*

'More than a Phase': A Resource Guide for the Inclusion of LGBT Learners in Formal and Non-Formal Education. Local Development Social Inclusion Programme (LDSIP), Pobal. 2006.

Teachers Supporting Diversity: Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Students. ASTI, TUI and GLEN.

Transgender and Gender Diversity Information for guidance counsellors. TENI.

Research & Articles

Diversity at School - Chapter 5: Sexual Orientation. The Equality Authority, 2004.

Drug Use Amongst Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Young Adults in Ireland. BeLonG To Youth Project, 2007.

Lodge, A; Gowran, S & O'Shea, K. *Valuing Visibility: An Exploration on How Sexual Orientation Issues Arise and Are Addressed in Post-Primary Schools - Summary Report.*

Mayock, Paula, Bryan, Audrey, Carr, Nicola & Kitching, Karl (2009) *Supporting LGBT Lives: A Study of the Mental Health and Well-Being of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People.* GLEN & BeLonG To.

Minton, Stephen, James, Dahl, Torunn, O'Moore, Astrid, Mona & Tuck, Donnelly. 2008. "An Exploratory Survey of the Experiences of Homophobic Bullying Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered Young People in Ireland". *Irish Educational Studies*. Vol. 27, No. 2, June 2008, 177-191.

Norman, J; Galvin, M & McNamara, G. 2006. *Straight Talk: Researching Gay and Lesbian Issues in the School Curriculum.* Dublin City University.

Further Contacts

Gay and Lesbian Equality Network -
GLEN

www.glen.ie

Tel. 01 672 8650

BeLonG To Youth Services

www.belongto.org

Tel. 01 670 6223

Transgender Equality Network Ireland -
TENI

www.teni.ie

Tel. 01 633 4687

Loving Our Out Kids – LOOK

Support group for parents of LGBT
young people.

www.lovingouroutkids.org

087 2537699

Biography

Sandra Irwin-Gowran is Director of Education Policy with GLEN – Gay and Lesbian Equality Network. GLEN is a policy and strategy focused NGO which aims to deliver ambitious and positive change for lesbian, gay and bisexual people (LGB) in Ireland, in schools, workplaces, in health and other service provision and in legal recognition of same-sex relationships and families. Education is a significant focus of the work of GLEN.