

Mary is a lesbian teacher and has been 'out' for many years

Tackling homophobia

Legislation outlawing discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation came into force last December. Mary Page tells **Adrian Gillan** about her experiences as a lesbian teacher

Mary Page has never hidden the fact that she is a lesbian – with her prominent role in the school and wider community, there has been no point.

Mary is assistant headteacher at **Redcastle Furze School** in Thetford, Norfolk; she used to be mayor and once stood for parliament. "In a small town like ours, where I've led a fairly public life, you'd have to be pretty switched off not to know," she explains.

"I remember sunning myself in the garden at home one time," she continues, "when two girls from the school came past, not noticing me there. One said, 'I've got Mrs Page next year.' Her friend said, 'She's a lesbian you know!'"

To which she replied, 'I know, and she gives lots of homework.' As it should be – a big non-issue!"

Mary, who represents the NASUWT teacher union at the Trade Union Congress's lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB) and transgender conference, hopes that the new employment laws will make it a non-issue for all teachers and pupils, whether gay, bisexual or straight.

Since laws were passed on 1 December 2003, it has been illegal for schools, as employers, to discriminate or tolerate discrimination against an employee on the grounds of their perceived or actual sexual orientation.

With an estimated 35,000 LGB teachers in England – represented in almost every school in the country – the significance and potential impact of this legislation cannot be understated.

As Alan Wardle, parliamentary director of LGB lobbying group Stonewall, says, "It's the first time LGBs have enjoyed specific legal protection in the workplace, alongside heterosexuals and people who face discrimination because they are transgender. Schools must now reassess certain assumptions that might have become culturally ingrained."

Spreading the word

However, many teachers are not even aware that Section 28, which prohibited local authorities from promoting homosexuality, was repealed last autumn and never applied directly to schools.

If schools want to safeguard themselves against litigation, they must convey the importance of these new laws to staff and act quickly, where necessary, to change school procedure and culture.

Culture of respect

Alan stresses that the laws shouldn't be seen as a threat. "A good school will be doing much of this anyway," he says. "It's about leadership, about heads sending out clear messages about what is and isn't acceptable and putting explicit policies, procedures and practices in place so as to create a culture of respect. And it should be a whole-school approach, integrated into the school's very fabric."

Mary knows how important this whole-school approach is. She has been at her school for 32 years and lives with her female partner. "I would have been an easy target," she says. "But I can honestly say I've never had problems. We have very explicit

equal opportunity policies (EOPs) at my school; all my colleagues are great and we have an amazing head. My school deserves recognition for its equality work."

She says it's mainly a language issue in the classroom: "In primary schools, people use 'gay' and other words to hurt. I remember telling a girl not to do something and as I was walking away, she called me a lesbian. I told her my private life was none of her business and that, quite apart from that, she had no right to be rude to me. When she left the school she made a point of finding me and giving me a hug."

Jonathan Charlesworth, who has taught in primary schools and is spokesman for LGB support and training organisation Educational Action Challenging Homophobia (EACH), applauds Mary's approach. "Teachers wouldn't hesitate to stop children using racist words," he says, "and some abusive words cannot be made more acceptable than others. That would create a hierarchy of discrimination."

"A headteacher should – with their governors' backing – agree with staff how to respond to pupils using words like 'gay' abusively in class," he explains. "It's generally best for the response to be simple and honest, explaining that people are different, that gay people exist and deserve respect and that it's wrong to offend them."

The Department for Education and Skills is currently conducting research into homophobia in schools and its findings

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WHAT THE NEW LEGISLATION MEANS FOR SCHOOLS

The Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations came into force on 1 December 2003. It is unlawful to discriminate (directly or indirectly) or harass a person in relation to employment or vocational training on the grounds of that person's sexual orientation.

Schools now risk legal challenge unless they protect staff from:

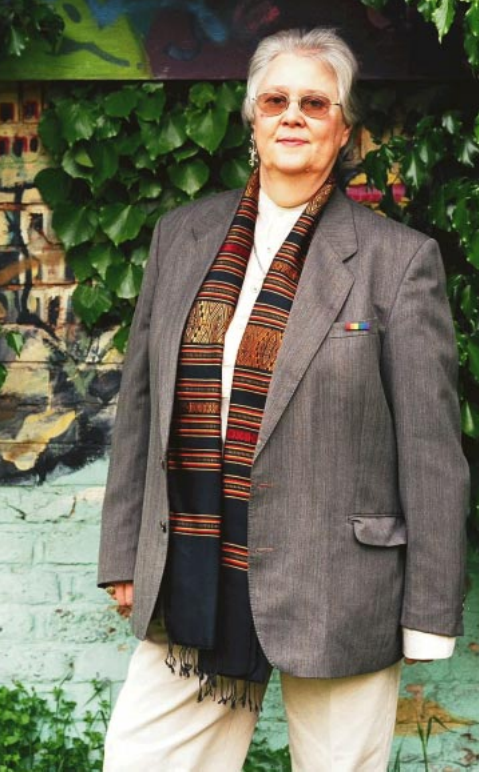
- being treated less favourably than others at any stage from recruitment to dismissal, including job offers, terms of employment, benefits or training, because they are, or are presumed to be, lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) or because

they associate with people who are

- being disadvantaged as a group by workplace practice and policy (for example, if they fail to qualify for workplace benefits) because of their sexual orientation
- being harassed, however unintentionally, by the homophobic actions or comments of employers or employees ('harassment' means engaging in unwanted conduct that violates, or is intended to violate, a person's dignity, or creates or is intended to create a degrading, intimidating, hostile, offensive or humiliating environment; this could include telling an employee they can't be 'out')

Schools must be aware that:

- the regulations apply to all forms of vocational training including teacher training
- they must take appropriate action in response to homophobic actions or comments by pupils or any third party entering the school to deliver services
- benefits offered to heterosexual non-married partners of school employees must now be made available to same-sex partners
- benefits offered to married partners will also need to be made available to same-sex civil partners if the Civil Partnership Bill is ratified by Parliament
- the laws apply to faith schools



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SUE SANDERS, Schools OUT!

discussion panels at the series of DfES regional anti-bullying conferences. She welcomes the fact that the DfES is conducting research and hopes it feeds into action.

Sue believes there are practical as well as moral reasons for a headteacher to take the lead. “Treating all employees with respect and consideration helps a school recruit and retain the best staff. It could also preserve their reputation,” she says.

A matter of choice

On the issue of privacy versus visibility, chair of NASUWT’s Equal Opportunities committee Chris Lines says it’s a personal matter whether teachers choose to come

out at school: “The school must now legally support teachers who choose to reveal their sexual identity. But on the other hand, it is also no one’s business what someone else’s sexuality is, and the law likewise protects that privacy too.”

Whatever LGB teachers decide about coming out, Chris says the unions can really help when problems arise through mediation behind the scenes. “The ideal is to sort things out properly, fairly and amicably, not to drag people in front of tribunals.” Mary’s sentiments entirely. **U**

Further information

www.teachernet.gov.uk/whole-school/behaviour/homophobia

DfES Anti-bullying Charter and pack
www.dfes.gov.uk/bullying

Schools OUT!
www.schools-out.org.uk

Guidance on the legislation
www.dti.gov.uk/er/equality

Stonewall www.stonewall.org.uk

Educational Action Challenging Homophobia(EACH)
www.eachaction.org.uk

For advice, call the EACH confidential helpline 0808 1000 143

National Children’s Bureau homophobic bullying factsheet
www.ncb.org.uk/sef/publications_sem.asp

will be presented to ministers later this year. It is looking at how it can work with a range of organisations to help schools tackle these issues and is examining how they’re covered in training for teachers and heads. Around 3,000 teachers will receive training this year on personal, social and health education, which will help them to address issues such as sexual orientation with young people. Materials for tackling homophobic bullying will also soon be available from the Healthy Schools Programme.

Homophobic bullying is included in the Anti-bullying Charter and pack, has been raised at anti-bullying conferences across the country and is included in materials and training on behaviour and attendance for primary schools. The charter, pack and materials are available from the DfES (www.dfes.gov.uk/bullying).

Sue Sanders of Schools OUT!, which is an LGB and transgender support, training and lobby group, is an LGB rep on the



“It’s about leadership. It’s about heads sending out clear messages”

ALAN WARDLE, Stonewall

CULTURE CHANGE: PRACTICAL STEPS FOR A MORE LGB-FRIENDLY PRIMARY SCHOOL

To help ensure workplace culture is compatible with the new legislation (see box, page 9), schools should:

- internally publicise the fact and significance of the new legislation
- stress that Section 28, which prohibited local authorities from promoting homosexuality, was repealed last autumn and never applied to schools or teachers directly

- review practices and policies (for example, equal opportunities and anti-bullying policies) to ensure lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) teachers are explicitly protected or catered for
- make sure that personal, social and health education (PSHE) openly and positively covers the whole range of relationship and family unit scenarios
- provide ongoing staff training on

- tackling homophobia and training on culture change for headteachers
- advertise for recruits in LGB media and include explicit EOP/inclusion statements in adverts and application packs; deliver LGB diversity training in all staff inductions
- provide positive images of LGB citizens – past and present, famous or otherwise – in relevant contexts
- agree how to respond to any pupil who uses words like ‘gay’ abusively

- use inclusive imagery and language in posters, school social invitations and newsletters
- ensure that email filters don’t block LGB-related words
- organise LGB interest groups for staff, where relevant, both for support and consultation
- review support procedures for LGB staff who wish to ‘come out’
- finally, do not assume that everyone is heterosexual