Homophobia in Sport:

What's the Score?

March 2013

Contents

"I felt like the coach should have reinforced that it's not right to use the term gay in a humorous way but instead he laughed as well." (Heterosexual Female Footballer, 21.)

Introduction

Sport and physical activity play an enormous role in people's lives. Apart from positively contributing to individual's health and wellbeing, sport brings a lot of enjoyment and can positively impact individual's mood state. However not everyone in society can enjoy the benefits of sport equally. It is widely recognised that homophobia exists in all facets of sport ranging from grass roots to the professional game.

On day to day basis a large number of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) individuals are exposed to homophobic bullying. Homophobia is especially prevalent in schools. Approximately 50% of LGBT pupils experience some form of homophobic bullying while at school due to their ''gender atypical behaviour'' (i). Not only LGBT youth are affected, but students who are perceived to be gay are also being bullied (ii). Similarly, LGBT individuals who belong to sports clubs are being regularly exposed to serious incidents of homophobic bullying.

Despite the fact that homophobia receives a great amount of attention in society and a number of organizations within sport including governing bodies and gay rights organizations (iii) try to address issues around homophobia, the problem still persists.

Homophobic bullying has a traumatic impact on those targeted. As a result of repeated exposure to homophobic discrimination, LGBT individuals very often drop out from sporting activities to protect themselves from negative treatment they would receive otherwise.

Only time will tell if the issue of homophobia can be eradicated completely. However, with research projects such as this, meaningful recommendations can be made to ensure that people become educated in the problem. Hopefully this will enable the public to stand up to homophobia and help the cause currently being fought by organisations such as Kick It Out and Tackle it.

i Rivers, I., 2000. Social Exclusion, Absenteeism and Sexual Minority Youth. *Support for Learning*, 15(1), 13.
ii Henshaw, P., 2011. Homophobic Bullying Widespread in UK Schools. *British Journal of School Nursing*, 6(6), 268-268.
iii Stonewell. 2007*. The School Report: The Experience of Young Gay People in Britain's Schools*. Available from: http://www.stonewall.org.uk/documents/school_report.pdf [Accessed 20 October 2012].

Summary and

Aim of the Project:

- To produce recommendations to schools and sports clubs on how to tackle the problem of gender diversity and homophobia in sport.

Objectives:

- To establish causes and incidences of homophobic bullying at secondary schools.

- To establish causes and incidences of homophobic language in community sports clubs.

- To establish the consequences of homophobic abuse in both community sport clubs and secondary schools.

This report focuses on the issue of homophobia in schools and sports clubs, in order to produce recommendations for clubs and schools on how to tackle the issue.

The research revealed that homophobia, and homophobic language especially, is prevalent in schools. **Over half** of students at school hear homophobic language on a daily basis, with a similar number admitting to using this language towards fellow students. The problem was clearly shown as many students do not understand the magnitude of the issue because the majority consider it *'banter'.*

Students from the focus group stated that there were **no rules or punishments** in place for the use of homophobic language. This was supported by the evidence gathered in the questionnaires because **68% of respondents** said they had never been disciplined for using homophobic terms and phrases.

Key Findings

A key finding was that there was a **lack of education** from schools regarding the issue. Due to the sensitive nature of the subject lessons are not in place to educate students about homosexuality and gender issues, meaning they are brought up with preconceived ideas that are embedded in society. Education needs to be started earlier to highlight the problem, so the use of homophobic language is seen as wrong instead of **'how we talk'.**

In sports clubs **1 in 5 respondents** admitted to hearing homophobic language, which shows it is not as common when compared to schools. It can be reasoned that this could be because participants know it is wrong. This means either the language is used less or some respondents underreported the use of homophobic language to make themselves not seem part of the problem.

Positives can be drawn from the fact that members of certain clubs stated there are strict rules in places and the use of homophobic language is not tolerated. **The RFU** were said to be very supportive and provide help for people who have faced abuse.

85% of people said they would have no problem with having a gay or lesbian player in their team, which illustrated an open attitude towards homosexuality, however this is not enough because homophobic terms are still common, which will continue to be a barrier to participation of gay and lesbian sportspeople.

Overall the key findings showed that the use of homophobic language is widespread, however there appear to be far **fewer actual homophobic attitudes**. This research indicates that the most effective way to tackle the use of homophobic language is through **education.**

Methodology

Research Design

Questionnaires and a focus group were used to collect data. This design leads to the opinions of a random sample of the population being taken (i). In this study responses were collected from a random cross section of sports teachers, coaches, participants and students. This allows the findings from this study to be applied to the wider population (ii).

Utilising both questionnaires and interviews allowed a large volume of data to be gathered through questionnaires, whilst utilising a focus group to give depth to the study (iii). The advantage of interviews and focus groups were that they gave the opportunity for respondents to give answers in greater detail, which is crucial when tackling such a controversial and sensitive issue as homophobia (iv).

Questionnaires

The questionnaires were distributed online to make the process more convenient for the researchers as they would be easily accessible for the respondents. This would also improve the number of responses received as they could be distributed quickly and further afield. The questionnaires were closed and anonymous, with a number of open questions to encourage participants to be truthful and give detail on their experiences, without the fear of being identified (v). Two questionnaires were distributed, one focusing on schools and students, whilst the other related to sport participants and coaches. Responses from the questionnaires numbered:

63 responses from sport participants and coaches.

88 responses from schools and students.

Focus Group

Qualitative data was collected through completing a focus group with 7, 16-18 year old college students. The focus group was semi structured where the interviewers planned the various topics which would be covered. The topics were explored further through the participants discussing the subject amongst themselves. This allowed the researchers to be flexible with how the discussions progressed as further explanations could be sought, which provided more in-depth data as the participants could build on issues raised by others in the group.

'Don't warn people not to use the words directly, but teach them that the words offend from an early age, punishment won't kick it out straight away.' (Focus Group Participant, 16)

i Lynch, C., 2010. Doing your Research Project in Sport. Exeter: Learning Matters Ltd.
ii Gratton, C., and Jones, I., 2010. Research methods for Sport Studies. 2nd Ed. Oxon: Routledge.
iii Bryman, A., 2012. Social Research Methods. 4th Ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
vi Lee, R. M., 1993. Doing Research on Sensitive Topics. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
v Walliman, N., 2005. Your Research Project. 2nd Ed. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Part One: Homophobia in Sports Clubs

"If I am being honest this is not a priority for us right now but going forward something like this would definitely help The FA to understand our grassroots perception around gender and homophobia issues."

(FA Social Inclusion Coordinator)

1 Is Homosexuality still a taboo in sport?

Throughout the research process a number of issues were encountered, these included:

- The majority of the participants were heterosexual (80%).

- The research team had agreed to conduct a focus group with a local gay friendly rugby club, however the club later pulled out of the focus group stating that it was not the best time for them. This indicates that homophobia remains a taboo subject within the LGTB community.

- Many institutions appeared interested in the research but did not see it as a priority for their organisation. This included the FA.

- The research was not always taken seriously by the participants. This was especially prevalent within schools with some teaching staff even joking about the subject matter.

- The research team encountered some problems when trying to gain access to schools due to the subject matter.

These issues indicate that homophobia still seems to be considered a taboo subject in society and especially in sport.

Which of the following would you say most accurately describes you?

Legend:
- Heterosexual
- Gay/ Lesbian
- Bisexual
- Transexual
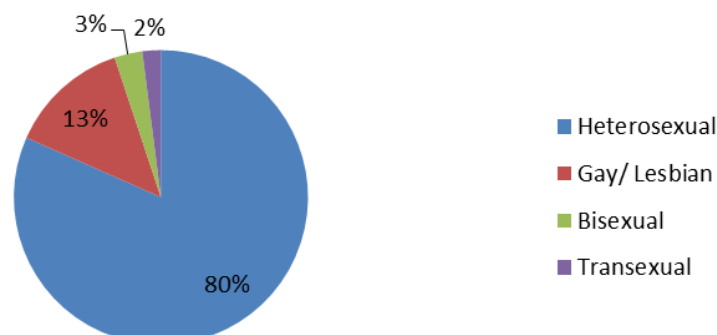
80%, 13%, 3%, 2%

How big is the Problem?

"I've seen a supporter walk onto the pitch and punch a player, knocking his front teeth out, shouting homophobic abuse in the process." (Gay Rugby Union Player, 34)

34% of participants admitted to using a homophobic slur during training or a match. Although this may seem like an encouraging statistic there is also cause for concern as players and coaches did not view homophobic language as insulting. The majority of participants stated that their use of homophobic language was **'just for fun'** and **'all part of the game'**.

It may also be the case that instances of Homophobic abuse are actually much higher but people are unwilling to report that they have used this language.

Have you ever called somebody 'gay' 'Lesbian' 'Dyke' 'Poof' or other variations at training or during a match?

34%

64%

■ YES
■ NO
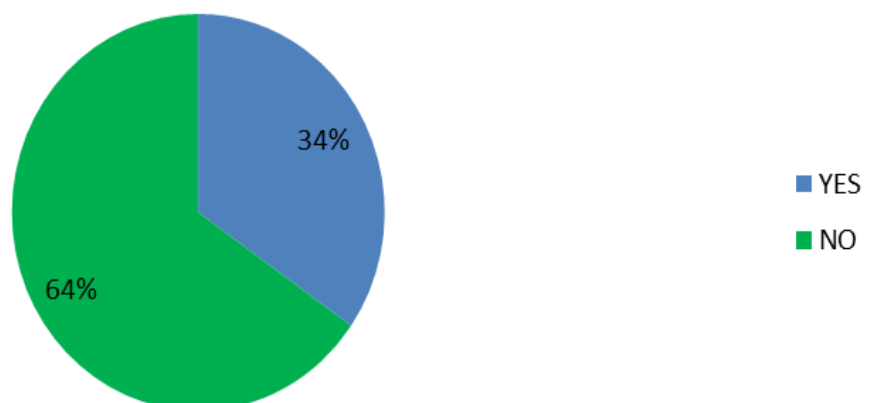
Homophobic abuse appears to be a common occurrence in sports clubs today. Many of the study's participants admitted to using or stated that they heard homophobic abuse on a regular basis during training and matches:

Participants also use homophobic slurs as away to insult players or acts that they perceive as weak or feminine:

"The term has never been used offensively, but as a way of describing someone's act that is seemingly weak or half-hearted." (Heterosexual male Footballer, 20)

"I would call someone gay, If they acted in a feminine way, like passing in a feminine way." (Heterosexual Male Footballer, 21)

"it's just a habit, when someone is being weak." (Heterosexual Male Football coach, 41)

"When a player overreacted to being injured and complained continually to the referee." (Heterosexual Male Footballer, 21)

"To insult someone for doing something wrong. It is used as a joke as I would receive it back though." (Heterosexual Male Footballer, 21)

Homophobic terms are often classified as 'banter' or mocking by many participants who often attempted to justify their behaviour by framing abusive comments as jokes that are just part of the game:

It was not used to cause offence or in a homophobic way. It was used as 'banter' between team mates when someone was getting tired   towards the end of a training session." (Heterosexual male basketball player, 22)

"Just out of fun and mocking in jest" (Heterosexual male ju-jitsu coach, 43)

"I just use it to offend as a joke or maybe more seriously in a match against opposition. Try to gain a mental advantage over opposition." (Heterosexual Male Footballer, 22)

"Not intended to insult, was used as a joke" (Heterosexual Male Tennis Coach, 22)

An important theme is that almost none of the participants who gave an explanation for their use of homophobic slurs thought that it was actually classed as homophobia. The majority of participants saw homophobic slurs as perfectly acceptable jokes and 'Banter'.

3 Is Homophobic Abuse Challenged?

"My coach must hear homophobic terms used a lot at training but I've never witnessed them do anything about it. It's just part of the game." (Heterosexual Male Basketball Player, 22)

22% of the participants reported coaches and support staff turning a blind eye to homophobic language. It is possible that incidents may have been under reported as Homophobia is a controversial issue.

Many of the participants who had witnessed coaching staff turning a blind eye to homophobic language again seem to suggest that homophobia was just part of taking part in their sport and used as a joke.

Have you ever heard a coach or support staff use homophobic language or turn a blind eye when hearing it used among athletes?

22%

73%

■ YES
■ NO
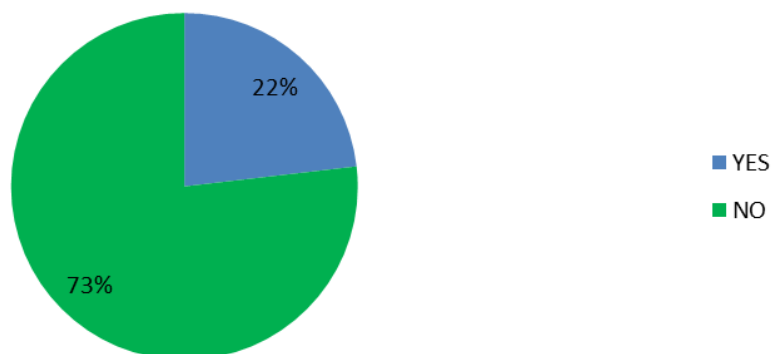
When participants were asked if they had ever witnessed a coach or player turn a blind eye to homophobic abuse many again indicated that it was a regular part of the game that was never called into question:

"One particular coach used such terms frequently and was unprofessional but nobody really said anything" (Heterosexual male Footballer, 21)

"Seems common place on most football training grounds and pitches I've played on, becomes the 'norm' as such. Mostly intended as a joke on somebody else but also in heated exchanges too." (Heterosexual Male Footballer, 22)

"The terms were used as a joke with the coach either ignoring it or joining in." (Heterosexual male Footballer, 21)

"Hockey often attracts people of different sexual orientations, and they are often happy and aware of this. If anything is said about the subject, it's always done in jest and good nature, often provoked by the player in question anyway." (Heterosexual female hockey player, 20)

However Rugby does appear to have a better track record than other sports. several rugby players commented that they had received the backing of the RFU who were quick to challenge homophobic abuse:

"We experienced homophobic abuse on the pitch by a team in Essex Division 2. The team were reported to the RFU who have dealt with the issue" (Gay Rugby Coach, 39)

"In rugby generally it is not an issue. The RFU are totally supportive of the game and do not tolerate this behaviour." (Gay Rugby Player, 39)

"I used to play in a "straight" team once and it happened a few times. I felt uncomfortable and did nothing." (Bisexual female Volleyball Player, 30)
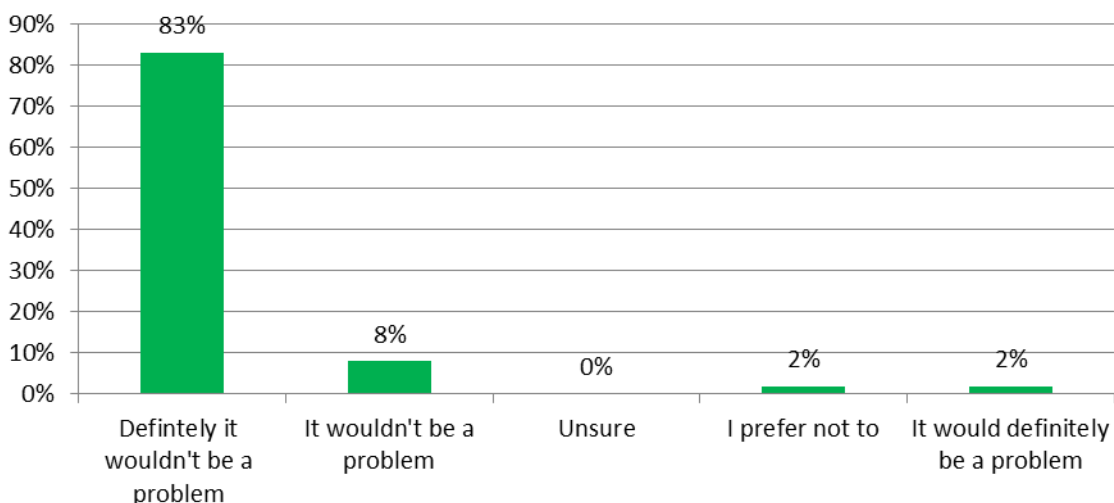
How can we combat Homophobia?

"Encourage people who hear that sort of language to stand up to, respond in positive way, like reporting the people who are using such language. And, promote equal rights more, I've never personally seen any adverts or posters about homophobic behaviour, especially compared to racial promotions such as 'Kick It Out'." (Heterosexual Male Footballer, 22)

83% of respondents indicated that they definitely would not have a problem being on a team with someone who identified themselves as LGBT. These results show that there is a high degree of tolerance and acceptance of LGBT players and coaches in sports clubs.

This indicates that the problem may actually be how those who use

homophobic language perceive it. It seem that Homophobic language is not viewed as abusive, this is illustrated in quotes from many of the participants. The high degree of acceptance can be viewed as a positive as it may be peoples perceptions of the language that needs changing, and not their actual attitudes towards the LGBT community.

Would you be happy to be on a team with someone that identified themselves as LGBT?

Response	Percentage
Definitely it wouldn't be a problem	83%
It wouldn't be a problem	8%
Unsure	0%
I prefer not to	2%
It would definitely be a problem	2%

"I don't think its a problem, its not serious or a personal attack." (Heterosexual male Ju-jitsu Coach, 43)

When asked what sports participants could do to stop the use of unchallenged homophobic language there were a range of responses.

Some participants did not perceive the use of homophobic language to be a problem. These tended to be older participants:

"Don't cause a fuss where there isn't a problem. Once there is an actual or perceived problem then something must be done about it." (Heterosexual Male Kayaker, 55)

"I don't think its a problem, its not serious or a personal attack." (Heterosexual male Ju-jitsu Coach, 43)

Younger participants did seem to perceive Homophobic language as a problem in their sport and called for more action to be taken especially with education and encouraging coaches to speak out:

"Educate people that just because it isn't said to hurt anyone, some people may be offended by it. If the coaches started to call people up on it when they heard homophobic language used then people might stop using it." (Heterosexual Male Basketball Player, 22)

"Start encouraging coaches and support staff to challenge and if necessary punish he person using the offensive language" (Heterosexual male Basketball Player, 22)

"Challenge the use of homophobic language. There needs to be a culture change so that homophobic slurs are not just thrown around like common insults." (Heterosexual Male Footballer, 22)

Other participants suggested raising awareness through the use of advertising and having a more open attitude towards sexuality:

"Being more open about sexuality and that it is just a fact of life. More education and training for coaches. EIYC should be a required element of their coaching certificate" (Heterosexual Female Snowsports Coach, 50)

"Explain that it could be hurtful to some. Put up posters accepting all people no matter what sexual orientation." (Heterosexual Female Rugby Union Support staff, 56)

"support gay friendly sports clubs in their area be visible about not tolerating homophobia or transphobia." (Gay male rugby union player, 42)
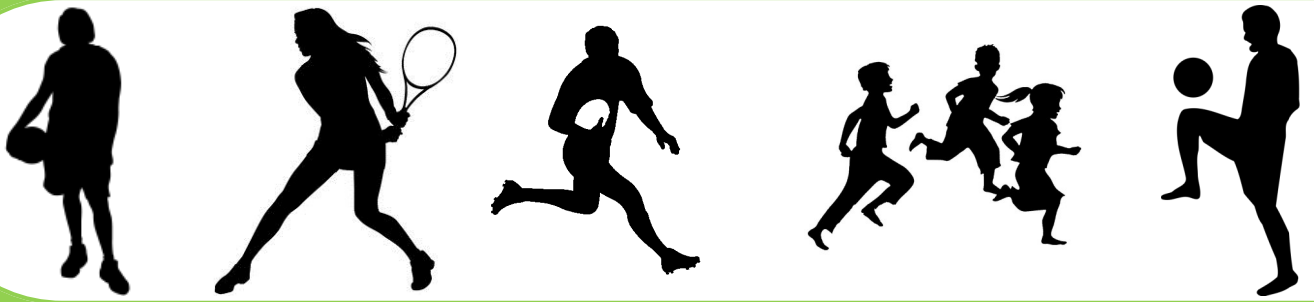
Part two: Homophobia in Schools

"a group of students teased another student for being gay, calling him names all the time, avoiding him deliberately and generally treating him differently."

(Heterosexual Male, 17)

1 How Big is the Problem in Schools?

"A transsexual student was constantly bullied by numerous bullies. The whole school was spoken to about this and it helped a little but the abuse still happened on a smaller scale. Staff tried to keep an eye out for these incidents." (Heterosexual Female teacher, 51)

Homophobic language appears to be particularly prevalent in schools. **Over half** of those children surveyed reported hearing homophobic language **everyday** with just over a quarter reporting that they hear it on a weekly basis. This highlights that homophobic language is a widespread problem in schools.

How often do you hear 'Gay, 'Lesbian', 'Poof', 'Dyke or other variations at school?

Category	Percentage
Never	6%
Everyday	57%
2-3 Times a Week	26%
Weekly	6%
Monthly	1%
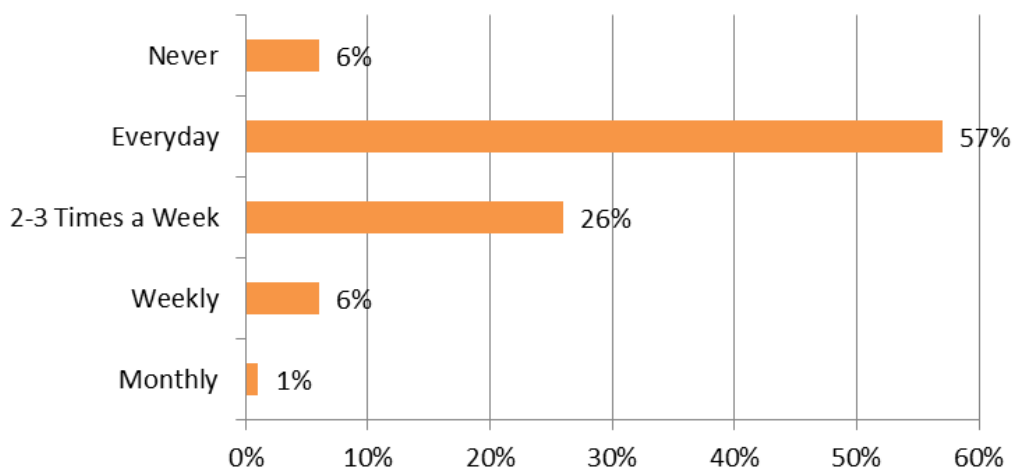
2 Why do children use Homophobic Terms?

After establishing homophobic language is frequently used within schools it is important to understand why this type of language is so common. The research suggests that the respondents believe there are multiple reasons for its use. **Half of the students** stated the terms were used as habit and for fun, which highlights that the use of the language just a part of how students communicate with their peers.

For this reason in may be particularly difficult to eliminate homophobic slurs from schools. Such phrases are often used as **banter** and not referring to somebodies sexuality, which means students do not see it as a major problem.

Despite a large number of students stating that homophobia is not used to offend this there is still the belief that a significant number of students do use homophobic language as a method of bullying.

"To get a reaction. I knew they weren't gay but said it to annoy them." (Heterosexual male, 15)

When respondents were asked to explain why they used homophobic terms most of the children did not seem to perceive their use of the language to be homophobic:

"Just as in like if I said to someone come to the canteen with me and they said no I'd be like aw your so gay. But not literally. I don't think anyone really uses the word gay I'm its real context that often anymore." (Homosexual female, 19)

"'As a joke to imply someone's personal opinion on any subject is homosexual, not to imply homosexuality is a bad thing." (heterosexual Male, 15)

"I have called some people gay because I sometimes have a little joke around and I never EVER! Mean it. And no has ever challenged why I use it. I am assuming they take it as a joke like it is meant to be." (Heterosexual Male, 11)

These findings were also consistent with the findings of the focus group conducted at a local school. The focus group participants indicated that the use of homophobic language was common place in school and often used to insult others:

"Everyone does, common used words, gay is an easy word to say. If vocabulary is weak, its just an easy thing to say to insult some-one."   (Heterosexual Male, 17)

"'I use the word 'gay' as a bad thing, not to directly discriminate someone." (Heterosexual Female, 17)

*It is important to note that **none** of the participants seemed to think that their use of homophobic language was wrong or discriminatory.*

3 Is Homophobia Challenged in Schools?

The research revealed that there was a **lack of support** from teachers for students who were victims of homophobic bullying.
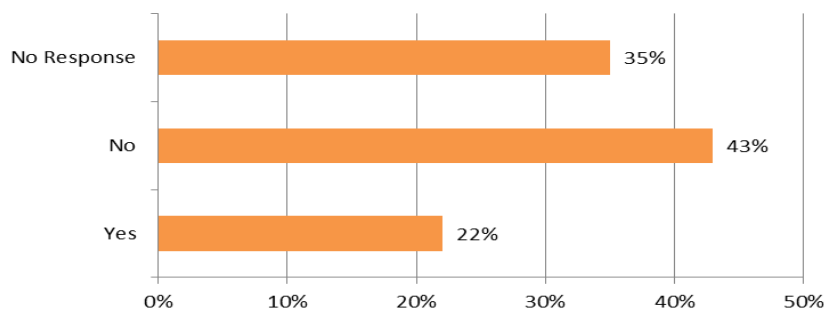
The majority of students who used the language were not disciplined. This may be why many of the students surveyed did not see a problem with their use of homophobic language.

When bullying occurs some victims are either not supported or too scared to ask for support. This explains why it is vital to attempt to reduce the use of homophobic language in schools from the outset.

Have you been disciplined for calling somebody 'Gay', 'Lesbian', 'Poof', 'Dyke' or other variations?

No Response	14%
No	68%
Yes	18%

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80%
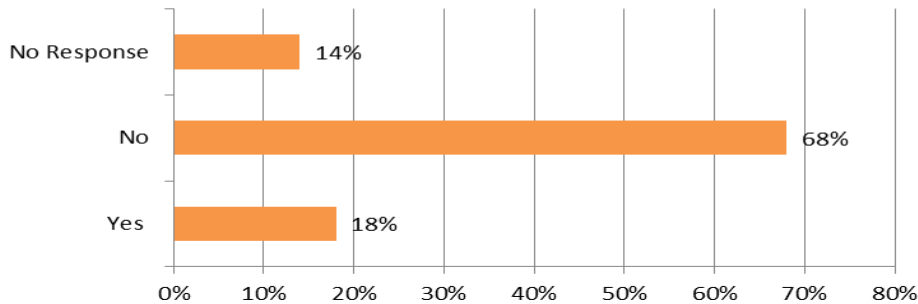
Did the victims receive support from other students of teachers?

No Response	35%
No	43%
Yes	22%

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50%

Would you be a friend to someone that identified themselves as LGBT

Definitely, it wouldn't be a problem	It wouldn't be a problem	Unsure	I'd prefer not to	Definitely Not
44%	15%	11%	6%	10%
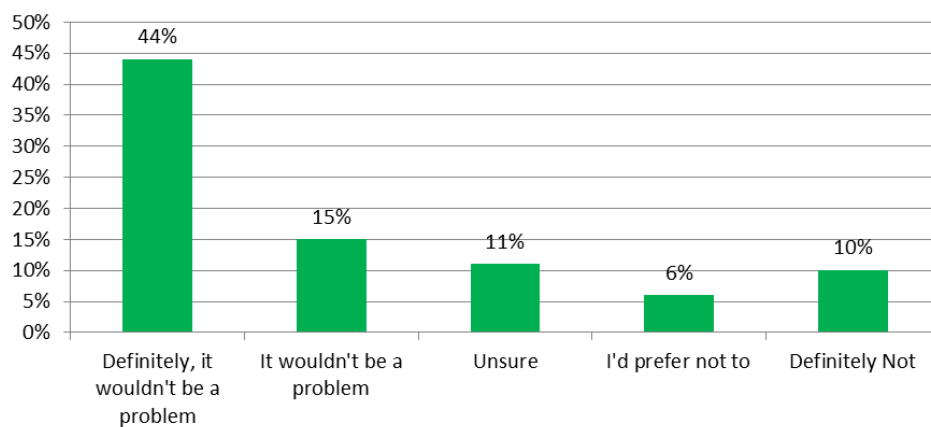
School children appear to be less accepting of LGBT individuals and display a higher degree of prejudice than the adult sport participants surveyed, with only **44%** stating that they definitely would not have a problem being friends with someone who identified as LGBT.

When asked what could be done to tackle the homophobia most of the participants indicated a need for more education from an early age:

"More education on the issues related around homophobia." (Heterosexual Female, 17)

"Enlighten all students that being homosexual is no different to being straight, all love is the same" (Heterosexual Male, 18)

"Don't warn people to use the words directly, but teach them that the words offend from an early age, punishment won't kick it out straight away." (heterosexual Male, 17)

There were also calls for schools to get tougher when tackling issues relating to homophobia:

"act serious with any incident and support them by setting a member of staff to deal and talk to them." (Heterosexual Male, 17)

"Give punishments to pupils if caught, make teachers teach lessons about it." (Heterosexual Male, 18)

"'Stricter discipline on it, immediate detention." (Bisexual Male, 15)

21

Part Three:

Recommendations

1 Recommendations

The Research undertaken during this project has allowed several recommendations to be developed, Four relating to sports clubs and Four relating to school sport. These are discussed in the following sections.

These recommendations are by no means a complete guide to tackling homophobia but rather should be viewed as a positive step on the way to tackling a complex issue. As a result the following overarching recommendation has been developed:

Develop a research agenda to examine in more depth the complex issues surrounding homophobia.

A research agenda should be established to further investigate the subject of homophobia to gain a deeper understanding surrounding causes and effects. It would be particularly useful to focus on gay sports clubs to gain their perspective on the many issues.

2 Sport Club Recommendations

The Key recommendations for sports clubs are as follows:

1) Educate sports club coaches on the subject of homophobia.

- 22% of athletes admitted to hearing their coach use homophobic language. It was also found that these coaches turned a blind eye when hearing it used among athletes.

- It should be required for coaches to be educated of the severity of homophobia to recognise its issues in order to eliminate homophobic terms within sports clubs. This would create a cultural change and highlight that it is not just part of the game. Coaching qualifications could include training on homophobia.

2) Develop a reporting system for victims of homophobic bullying.

- A supportive and confidential reporting system for individuals who are the recipients of homophobic abuse would help eradicate feelings of negativity and increase their confidence in talking about the topic. This could potentially reduce homophobic bullying within sports clubs by raising awareness of the issues of homophobia.

- Homosexuality, in particular is seen as a taboo subject in football. Therefore backing from the FA through conferences for agents and managers to support and advise gay players would be very beneficial.

3) Create an active and visible anti homophobia campaign.

- Raising awareness through a public campaign should be visible to society in order to educate and promote homophobia. This would increase public concern for the subject area and reduce homophobic bullying within sports clubs and society.

- Campaigns must challenge anti-gay abuse and enforce positive messages for LGBT'

4) Encourage clubs to have a zero tolerance policy towards homophobic abuse.

- One of the biggest challenges may be getting players and coaches that homophobia does not have to be part of the game. This seems to be a particularly large problem in football. Taking a proactive stance and having a zero tolerance attitude towards homophobia may be the most effective way to begin to tackle the issue.

"We have noticed that teams hurling the most abuse are the teams that usually underestimate us, assuming they will win on heterosexuality alone – who then get beaten and start throwing abuse around." (Gay Rugby Union Player playing on a gay team, 34.)

3 School Recommendations

The Key recommendations for schools are as follows:

1) Educate school children on the subject of homophobia.

- 57% of students confessed to hearing homophobic language at school on a daily basis.

- 59% of these students admitted to being guilty of such behaviour and said it was commonly used in the form of a joke, not homophobia. However, 19% of responses use homophobic terms to insult.

- Educating children needs to be on the school agenda to highlight student's awareness that homophobia is an issue, not a joke.

2) Train teachers to identify and challenge homophobic behaviour.

- 43% of students said victims of homophobic bullying did not receive any support from teachers.

- 68% of students admitted to not being disciplined for using homophobic language.

- These findings link to education and teachers need to be trained to be able to step in and deal with the issues surrounding homophobia efficiently.

3) Increase public support in schools.

- Schools should display a more vocal and supportive role for homosexuality and homophobic bullying. More public backing from schools would help raise awareness of the issues surrounding homophobia and contribute to the attempt to kick homophobic bullying out of schools.

4) Encourage schools to have a zero tolerance policy towards homophobic abuse.

- Again this will be one of the biggest challenges. There needs to be a cultural change to educate school children and let them know that homophobic language is not acceptable in any areas of life.

"If someone came out, it could change the way people think about the subject, and more people may come out as well." (Heterosexual Male, 17)

Speaking about gay professional sport role models.

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