



Module Summary: Gender & Homosexuality

This module introduces students to key concepts and issues relating to homosexuality. It covers some theoretical perspectives (on biology, sexual health, gender and sexual orientation) illustrated with relevant case studies and activities.

1. Sexual identities

Part 1 focuses on the **development and identification of sexual identities**, outlining the basic terms, concepts and questions teachers, pupils and parents are likely to come across when addressing homosexuality. What does it mean to be gay or bisexual? What do we know about the biology of sexual orientation, and how could this help us explain homosexuality to pupils? Unfortunately, our understanding of many of these areas is still limited. But while a strong scientific grasp of some of these issues is not yet within reach, it is important to outline what we do know, and to place homosexuality in a historical, social and psychological context.

In the past few years, science has made some strides in understanding sexual orientation. There is much left to be discovered and explained, but there is strong evidence for the biological origin of our sexual identity, looking at particular epigenetics and prenatal sex hormones (Rahman, 2014). Research further suggests that both sexual orientation and gender identity are fluid rather than fixed. This means that an individual's sexual orientation and gender identity should be mapped on a spectrum, rather than assigned to any one category (Academy of Science of South Africa, 2015). History serves up stories of (accepted as well as rejected) homosexuality, among men and women, across virtually all cultures and communities, further undermining the notion that we freely 'choose' or can be conditioned into our sexual identity or sexual orientation.

But persistent and pejorative stereotypes continue to shape the **self-perception and external perception** of LGB pupils. Research indicates that large swathes of the LGBT community have experienced discrimination on the basis of their identity, leaving them suffering from low self-esteem - a persistent problem with major and lasting consequences for their personal development (Riddle-Crilly, 2009). The communities they live and work in, too, have a large impact on their psychological and social well-being, and different cultures and communities can hold strongly diverging views on homosexuality. Homo'poly's own research shows much stronger awareness and acceptance of homosexuality in the Belgium, Germany, Spain, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom than in Hungary, Poland and Turkey. Religion plays its part, but so does the urban-rural divide (with cities typically being more accepting) and the generation gap (with young people typically, but by no means always, being more accepting).

Pupils across Europe, then, experience vastly diverging approaches to **sexual orientation and diversity in their upbringing (family and community life) and supervising (school environment)**.

In the last few decades, an increasing body of research has emerged about the educational experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) youth. School climate is extremely influential, and has been linked to the mental and academic health of students. In the context of education, it is very important that teachers and trainee teachers learn to develop inclusive classrooms. A 2016 survey found that homophobic remarks about gender expression are still common (Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewski, 2016). Three-thirds of pupils reported feeling unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation and gender expression. They frequently avoid spaces seen to be unsafe, such as bathrooms and locker rooms, with three out of four pupils stating they had experienced verbal harassment based on sexual orientation. LGBT students who experienced these discriminatory behaviors reported missing more days of school, recorded lower achievement scores, and held lower educational aspirations and a lower level of school belonging. They also reported poorer psychological well being.

2. Coming out

When it comes to sexual orientation and sexual identity, society knows many 'boxes'. Where a person fits – and whether they fit anywhere at all – should be up to them. Part 1 illustrates that reality is not quite that straightforward. So what does this mean for pupils who consider **coming out**? When, where and how do LGB pupils come out? What can be learned from their experiences, and what risks should teachers be aware of (social isolation, bullying, poor performance, ...)?

'Coming out' refers to someone telling someone else their sexual orientation. People who are attracted to the opposite sex - the prevailing norm - very rarely need to come out, but lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, have to make the choice to either 'hide' how they feel or actually tell people their sexual orientation or gender identity (LGBT Youth UK, 2018). LGBT people can come out at any age, and for any number of reasons.

Whatever the reason, a young person's **peers, family and society** play a critical role in making 'coming out' a positive and affirmative experience. Young people often come out to their peers before coming out to their parents or wider family. Some LGB pupils will receive excellent support; many will not. Teachers should be equipped to assess whether a pupil has the support he/she needs, and to offer or at the very least point to other sources of support if needed.

When students do not come out for fear of bullying or harassment, the effects to their mental health and personal and professional development can be detrimental. **Creating safe schools** is key to making pupils feel safe coming out. This requires all of those involved – pupils, teachers, support staff and the wider school community – being encouraged to contribute to an LGB-friendly space, where possible one that extends beyond the school gates.

3. Sexual health

For most teachers and parents, sexual health is a difficult and uncomfortable topic to tackle. Unsurprisingly, it becomes all the more fraught where homosexuality is concerned. This is both unnecessary and harmful, as pupils miss out on potentially lifesaving information. This section therefore offers broad introduction to sexual health, including – but not limited to – sexual rights and sexuality. Drawing on the inclusive and comprehensive World Health Organisation definition of sexual health, we look beyond the physical aspects and include emotional and psychological well-being across sexual experiences and interactions.

The next section provides an overview of **sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)**, including HIV/AIDS, with the aim of dismantling stereotypes relating to homosexuality by providing objective information to teachers and pupils. Here, too, the focus is on correct and comprehensive information that is proactively shared to encourage informed, safe and healthy behaviour on the part of (homosexual and bisexual) pupils.

Lastly, teachers and pupils are pointed to different forms and functions of comprehensive sexuality education. What sex education – formal and informal – is being offered, and what space is there for homosexuality in ‘traditional’ sex education? Virtual courses and materials improve access, which is helpful and necessary for those whose parents and/or teachers are unable or unwilling to answer their questions. But as always, this carries the risk of having pupils rely on unverified or incorrect information, with potentially disastrous consequences. This section directs teachers and pupils to appropriate materials and approaches, once again with a focus on safe sex and prevention.

4. Different ways of living

This final part of the first module takes us back to some of the questions we started with. What is heterosexuality, what is homosexuality, what is bisexuality? We accept that all of these are normal, but what is normal? The problem with assuming anything ‘to be normal’, is that it assumes that certain ways of being are therefore the ‘correct way’ of being. Barker (2016, online) argues that: “Normal” cannot mean and must not mean “what we see all the time” or “what we see the most of.” It must have a different meaning from those. So challenging heteronormativity is not about challenging heterosexuality, because ‘most’ of the population are heterosexual. Challenging heteronormativity is about questioning the idea that heterosexuality is the only normal, natural, or good form of sexuality (Barker, 2016).

Therefore, in order to support our students in school and importantly to ensure they are educated in safe, welcoming, inclusive and innovative environments, we need to be clear about the terminology related to gender and sexuality. But we mostly need to engage in critical debate to empower all communities for LGBT acceptance. We need to equip teachers, parents and the wider community young people are part of with the tools to talk about sexuality, to accept differences, to move away from the thinking that something is, or is not, ‘normal’. That requires effort, patience and time. To inform and inspire those conversations, this section offers yet more resources, stories and suggestions for classroom, ‘whole school’ and community approaches.