

# **Uneven Playing Fields**

## **– Social Exclusion Experienced by LGBT Youth at School**

**by Judit Takács<sup>1</sup>**

*ABSTRACT: This paper will focus on barriers preventing LGBT youth from successful social integration. The empirical base of this paper is an original survey research conducted by the ILGA-Europe and IGLYO social exclusion research team in 2006. From the individual responses of young LGBT people (collected from 37 European countries) similar patterns of social exclusion emerged, indicating that among the main agents of socialisation school can be an especially problematic social context for LGBT youth to fit into.*

**KEYWORDS:** social exclusion, LGBT youth, oppression, school, bullying, silencing

### **1. Introduction: Social exclusion of LGBT youth**

LGBT is an umbrella term covering a very heterogeneous group of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people who often appear with joint political efforts in the local and international political arena for efficiency: in order to get a better social representation and more political support. While there can be significant differences between the individuals signing up for being politically represented under the LGBT heading, their main uniting force derives from their social minority group membership. LGBT people are members of relatively powerless social groups, but they differ from “traditional” minorities in two main aspects: they are usually not marked by their bodies, thus they are not recognisable at first sight; and their existence is still perceived in a lot of places as “challenging the natural order of things” (Gross 1991).

LGBT people as social minority group members can suffer from various forms of socio-economic and cultural injustice, but according to Nancy Fraser their political claims can rather be identified as claims for *recognition* aimed at remedying cultural injustice than some sort of political-economic restructuring referred to as *redistribution* aiming at redressing economic injustice. In this context recognition is defined as a cultural or symbolic change involving the upward revaluation of disrespected identities, or even a complete transformation of societal patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication in ways that would change everybody’s sense of self.

Gays and lesbians suffer from heterosexism: the authoritative construction of norms that privilege heterosexuality. Along with these goes homophobia: the cultural devaluation of homosexuality. Their sexuality thus disparaged, homosexuals are subject to shaming, harassment, discrimination, and violence, while being denied legal rights and equal protections – all fundamentally denials of recognition. To be sure, gays and lesbians also suffer serious economic injustices; they can be summarily dismissed from paid work and are denied family-based social-welfare benefits. But far from being rooted directly in the economic structure, these derive instead from an unjust cultural-valuational structure (Fraser 1997; 18).

Lack of social recognition is closely connected to the ambiguous citizen status of LGBT people, especially if we accept the notion that full citizenship “requires that one be recognized not in spite of one’s unusual or minority characteristics, but with those characteristics understood as part of a valid possibility for the conduct of life” (Phelan 2001; 15-6).

Political scientists also emphasize that the social exclusion and marginalisation of subordinate groups and persons, including LGBT people, is a wrong and harmful social practice not only because it undermines promises of equal opportunity and political equality implied in democratic commitments, but also because more inclusion of and influence for currently under-represented social groups can help a society confront and find some remedies for structural social inequality (Young 2000). This recognition is reflected in the European Parliament resolution on homophobia in Europe that called on the member states of the European Union to ensure that LGBT people are protected from homophobic hate speech and violence and ensure that same-sex partners enjoy the same respect, dignity and protection as the rest of society.<sup>2</sup>

In this article examining the social exclusion of LGBT youth I apply a structural concept of oppression (Young 1990) focussing on the disadvantage and injustice young LGBT people, as individuals and members of oppressed social groups, suffer because of everyday practices resulting from unquestioned norms and assumptions underlying institutional rules. According to Young there are five criteria for determining the scope and extend of oppression: *economic exploitation*, *socio-economic marginalization*, and *powerlessness* explain oppression mainly in economic terms (who works for whom, who does not work, and who can make important decisions), while *cultural imperialism* and *systematic violence* go beyond features primarily related to the social division of work.

One of the practical advantages of using this model is that it can accommodate the similarities in the oppression of different social groups as well as the overlaps of multiple faces of oppression. Being young and identifying as LGBT people, LGBT youth often become victims of multidimensional mechanisms of social exclusion and multiple forms of discrimination on the basis of age and sexual orientation as well as gender identity. These overlapping aspects of vulnerability imply that European LGBT youth can be socially excluded as a result of their low incomes, their unemployment, their poor education, health, and housing conditions, their gender, religion, ethnic origin, as well as their inability to realise their autonomy and citizenship rights because of their LGBT status.

Another practical advantage of this approach is that all of Young's criteria can be operationalized and applied through the assessment of observable behaviour, texts and other cultural artefacts (1990). As our research findings will also indicate, at school LGBT youth suffer especially from cultural imperialism, i.e. "how the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one's own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one's group and mark it out as the Other" (Young 1990; 58-9), and the social practice of systemic violence, consisting in not only direct victimization resulting from "random, unprovoked attacks on their persons or property, which have no motive but to damage, humiliate, or destroy the person" (61) but also "in the daily knowledge shared by all members of oppressed groups that they are *liable* to violation, solely on account of their group identity" (62).

## **2. Methods**

The empirical base of this paper is an original survey research conducted by the ILGA-Europe and IGLYO social exclusion research team in 2006. The main goal of the research<sup>3</sup> was to illustrate how mechanisms of social exclusion work in everyday life to prevent the successful social integration of LGBT youth.

The survey was based on a classic or targeted community-based sample (N=754),<sup>4</sup> which statistically does not have the validating strength of a representative sample. However, as LGBT status is not an officially recorded – and not at all strictly recordable – personal characteristic of people, the “proper representation” of LGBT people is very problematic, if not impossible, especially in quantitative research. In this context the main aim was to reflect the lived experience of self-identified LGBT youth and produce indicative data about their problems. Therefore the analysis was focussed on similar patterns of social exclusion to be found all over Europe, instead of interpreting country-specific features.

In the first phase of the analysis, quantifiable variables were examined by looking at the positive and negative responses to questions on the experience of prejudice and discrimination affecting young people because of their LGBT status. In order to balance the unequal distribution of responses by country in the original sample, at least to a certain extent, the original sample was weighted by country population size in order to produce the quantitative survey results. In the second phase, the content of questionnaires were analysed by coding the individual respondents’ answers according to five problem areas: family, school, peer group, community and media. In the following I will present the main findings of the survey concerning social exclusion mechanisms affecting young LGBT people at school that was shown to be an especially problematic social context for them to fit into.

### **3. Findings**

61% of respondents referred to negative personal experiences at school related to their LGBT status. Within the school context we asked specifically about the curriculum (whether the respondents ever found anything in the school curriculum that expressed prejudice or discriminative elements targeting LGBT people) and experiences of bullying or other forms of verbal and/or physical violence in school. 53% of the respondents reported bullying, while 43% found prejudice or discriminative elements in the school curriculum.

#### **3.1. Causes and consequences of bullying**

Bullying – interpreted as systematic abuse of power which repeatedly and deliberately harms others (Reid – Monsen – Rivers 2004) – includes a wide spectrum of negative experiences from name calling through ostracism to even life threatening physical attacks. According to previous research findings the content of abuse can consist of the following: “I was called names, I was hit or kicked, I was frightened when a particular person looked in my direction, No one would speak to me, Rumours were spread about me, I was ridiculed in front of others, I was sexually assaulted, They took my belongings” (Rivers 2000; 15), as well as being threatened with physical attack or with disclosure of their gay identity, objects thrown at them, and even verbal abuse from teachers and other school staff (D’Augelli 1998; Vincke – Stevens 1999; McNamee 2006).

Bullying was reported by a higher proportion of male respondents (61%) than female respondents (58%) – and by at least half of the respondents in each age group, but people younger than 25 experienced bullying most frequently (54%). While homophobic bullying is an issue that goes beyond education itself, it has to be addressed within schools since it affects the learned behaviours of children and the opinions and attitudes that they carry into maturity (McLean – O’Connor 2003).

Most of our respondents who experienced bullying at school reported verbal attacks, while a much smaller number of them suffered physical acts of violence.

*Occasional words and comments such as 'it's just a phase', 'you are that lesbian aren't you', 'who is the man and who is the women', 'your relationship is not proper or natural'. (UK F23)<sup>5</sup>*

*No physical violence but lots of verbal and indirect one, snigger when we pass, insults written on our tables, things said behind our backs. (France F18)*

*Mostly verbal abuse and emotional bullying in the sense of being excluded from activities, being ignored (Hungary M21)*

*Physical violence happened only once – but verbal violence is a common thing every day. (Slovakia M18)*

*They threw things at me, spat on me, damaged my belongings (Hungary FtM32)*

*I was beaten up with a tennis racket, sticks, kicked, punched and physically abused by several people at the same time so that at least one of them could hold me down when the others were beating me up. They could hold me down and jam my head into the wall, keep me from breathing. The teachers and the school nurse all knew about it but they never did anything to stop it. I never pressed charges against the school. (Sweden F20)*

Longer term or repeated bullying was shown to have serious consequences on the victims. Some of them became withdrawn and socially isolated in the period while most other young people learn to express themselves socially (Martin 1982). It should also be pointed out that children and adolescents who come to school and feel targeted, labelled, stereotyped, and marginalized because of who they are – or who their family members happen to be – are in effect denied a level playing field in the academic arena: thus it is unreasonable to expect them to learn, and to participate effectively in school life, if they are constantly feeling threatened or abused (Roffmann 2000).

*I was offended and called names. It also happened that guys looked askew at me and never really wanted me to be a part of their company. Words can hurt even more than physical violence and it eventually caused me to become very reserved, unwelcome, I avoided social contacts until the age of 18. (Slovenia M21)*

*When I was at school, I was bullied for being gay but it was only because my classmates presumed I was gay ... it was before I even told people I was gay. I was verbally and physically bullied and I had no friends for the first three years of high school. It made me very insecure as a person and I found it hard to make friends after that as it had made me really paranoid and vulnerable. (UK M21)*

In some cases victims of bullying did not see any other way out than leaving school altogether. Most people are aware of the fact that dropping out of school or becoming an early school leaver significantly reduces the chances of any young person of successful social integration later in life. However, bullying can create such an unbearable situation for its victims that they take even this risk, too.

*I quit high school at the age of 16 because my classmates constantly made rude fun of me with sexuality related jokes. (Hungary M33)*

*I was beaten up by some girls in the locker room after gym class when they found a paper with*

*the website of a LGBT forum... They said they wouldn't tell anyone if I promised to do everything they told me to. And so I did. I missed a lot of classes and never finished high school because I just can't go back to that high school again! (Portugal F18)*

A lot of respondents reported that they were bullied by peers even before they were out, i.e. before they had consciously revealed their LGBT status in school.

*In high school people understood it about me before I did and of course, didn't accept it (Italy M24)*

*In secondary school even if I hadn't said anything about my sexuality a guy bullied me for a year by beating me up and calling me "poof", he probably saw my homosexuality that I was hiding (France M25)*

*Even when I was not out, or even understood who I really was, people were still calling me "fag" and laughing at me, all the way from grade 7 to 11. (Latvia M34)*

Bullying was often interpreted by our respondents as being related to or being the consequence of gender nonconforming behaviour, character and look – or what was perceived to be such by others:

*As a kid at school, I was recurrently harassed and bullied by other boys who used their aggressiveness to subject me to humiliating and embarrassing jokes. Although kids can be cruel to anyone, they can be particularly cruel to other kids of the same age who act less like the traditional sexual roles. (Portugal M28)*

*When I was younger I was more effeminate and that is why boys made fun of me all the time. (Moldova M33)*

*In the primary school I wasn't out, but I always talked more with girls, boys were pestering me whether I wasn't gay and called me 'little dolly'. (Czech R. M21)*

*A bunch of kids once stole my wallet and cut it to pieces, and the stuff inside, like ID, photos, etc. because they thought I was gay. Funny thing is I had no idea back then. I was 13 and a tomboy. They judged me on appearance, because I dressed like a boy. (Portugal F20)*

*I was physically abused every day in school for four years. This was because they found me too butch and that I looked like a boy, and of course, because I am a lesbian. Therefore they felt that they should bully me since the first grade. (Sweden F20)*

This phenomenon can also be related to the strict enforcement of rigidly separated sets of gendered behaviour by peers who seemed to suspect homosexuality when gender role expectations were not “properly” fulfilled. Gender nonconformity or “gender atypicality” has been shown to be associated with increased risk for victimization, harassment, and even suicide of LGBT youth (Remafedi et al., 1991, D'Augelli et al. 2002).

In this context obvious practical problems of transgender students trying to fit into the two-gendered world of schools should also be mentioned: *PE classes keep boys and girls separate and FtM or MtF does have problems fitting in (Italy FtM23).*

However, it must be noted that ideas about “proper gender roles” and “proper sexualities” are being learnt through a long process of socialisation, reflecting the norms of society. In some societies LGBT people “represent a chaos which is deviant, that they have to learn more

*about, to be able to understand, because what they know so far is based on the prejudice of society” (Swedish F44). In other societies even the potential existence of non-heterosexual ways of being can be denied, at least officially: Needless to say I was not out at the school. I was a pupil during the Soviet occupation and the issue of homosexuality was such a taboo!!! As a result I only realised that I was gay when I was around 14 years old. My closest friend in my class was also gay and it made life much easier for both of us (Latvia M37) – though in present day Europe this is not the most typical experience any longer.*

Perceived nonconforming gender behaviour leading to assumptions and suspicions of being non-heterosexual leading to anti-gay/lesbian victimisation at school could affect non-heterosexual as well heterosexual youth. Previous research findings also emphasized that bullying on the basis of sexual orientation can affect all children, since heterosexual children are sometimes wrongly presumed to be otherwise and also subject to such abuse (McLean – O’Connor 2003; D’Augelli 2003).

*People were calling me fag and blow me ... but one other straight schoolmate who was as shy as I was received the same treatment... (France M24)*

*In school there were loads of jokes, insults and mocks against ‘supposed’ homosexuals. (Italy M28)*

Here we can capture the practical application and mobilisation of the “heterosexual matrix” (Butler 1990): the widespread assumption about the illusory internal coherence of identity, which is manifested in the opposition of asymmetrically divided female and male characteristics in the cultural matrix of gender norms, and in the “heterosexualization of desire”. Pupils bullying others on the basis of an “insufficient degree” of masculinity or femininity internalized the causal interrelation between one’s sex and one’s gender as well as the culturally constructed gender roles and sexual desire or sexual behavior. This aspect of anti-gay/lesbian bullying depends more on the perpetrators’ gender socialization norms than on the actual traits of the victims, thus it can affect anyone irrespective of their “real” sexual orientation or gender identity.

Besides those who reported bullying not having come out at the time of the event or had not – yet – identified themselves as LGBT, we can also refer to those who did not become victims of direct bullying but gained negative experiences of discrimination anxiety related to fear of discrimination or bullying. In this context revealing one’s true self could be seen as a “luxury” with dangerous consequences.

*I never told anybody in school about my orientation, except the gay people, the rest of them didn’t know, or at least I think so. Being an adolescent I couldn’t afford telling it to everybody...because this is the most vulnerable age, when you just begin to understand what’s going on inside of you, and sharing this with somebody who might not understand you, is a luxury. (Moldova F23)*

*I suffered psychological violence of being split with fear of admitting my sexual orientation. (Italy M25)*

*Maybe I should consider myself happy, but no, I cannot recall any open discriminatory events against me as a gay man. This is however also due to the fact that I have not come out to my school mates till grammar school (secondary school level), so the fact that I was keeping to myself and not being open about my sexual orientation may be considered as a reaction of me*

*arriving from a deep seeded fear of being harassed as a gay male in this community. (Slovakia, M27)*

*I wasn't out at school due to anxiety of discrimination. (Germany M30)*

### **3.2. The role of teachers**

While respondents claimed that mostly their peers were responsible for bullying them, 14% of those who reported on negative experiences in school mentioned teachers as being the source, or being part of their problems. They referred to teachers who *failed to provide help and guidance* (Austria M21), who did not want to or couldn't *guess where my problems were coming from at the age of 16-19* (France M21), who *were not supportive at all* (Moldova F30). Many factors can explain the reluctance of school teachers and administrators to intervene against blatant anti-sexual minority bias: prejudice, stereotyping, ignorance, and sheer discomfort with the topic of homosexuality and transgender certainly play a part as well as the fact that many school personnel are genuinely confused or conflicted about these issues because of their own moral or religious beliefs (Roffmann 2000; Ryan – Rivers 2003).

In some cases teachers were described by respondents as passive outsiders who – instead of helping the isolated, hurt and/or bullied students – seemed to be part of the plot on the side of the LGBT-opposing camp.

*All the time during secondary school, homophobic insults that gave me the wish of not being in this world anymore. I could have talked about it to the headmaster or teachers but as they knew the situation already and weren't doing anything against it I wasn't expecting anything from them. (France M22)*

*When I was kicked out of home I started missing a lot of classes and when my Portuguese teacher asked me what was happening I told her the truth. Instead of helping me and talking to my parents she told me to not tell anyone. (Portugal F18)*

*I had to ask for exemption from physical education because of bullying: they locked me out of the changing room day by day – and the teacher secretly supported this practice. (M17 Hungary)*

*The fact that all the insults I've faced have never been forbidden or sanctioned [give] the feeling that it's normal to bully LGBT as nobody stops you or tells you it's wrong. (France M22)*

On a few occasions homophobia operating on the institutional level – as if heterosexism was part of official school policy – could be detected, too.

*I know that three of the teachers were expelled from the department because one of them is a gay man, and the other two were dealing with 'improper' issues i.e. LGBT, feminism (Poland F23)*

*I went to a church affiliated secondary school where the director was aware of my sexual orientation. The only thing she asked me was to keep it secret in the school. ... [Otherwise] I had a very good relationship with this director. (Hungary M24)*

Some respondents reported on homophobic and heterosexist manifestations of teachers who *have spoken against homosexuality without knowing that there are gays in their class* (Finland F22), who *laugh when they briefly talk about this subject* (France M25), who often

made me the target of jokes publicly (Hungary FtM32). There were various negative experiences mentioned:

*I've had a teacher in secondary school who took it upon herself to launch a crusade against homosexuality. She taught me biology and half way through the lesson she would stop what she was doing and try and connect what we had just learnt with homosexuality (even when the lesson would have been about plants) in order to show us how disgusting, how perverse and mentally deficient homosexuals were. Having attended a church school the atmosphere was not much different with other teachers, yet most preferred to avoid even mentioning the word homosexual. (Malta F23)*

*There was a young researcher a year ago. When she found out that I am lesbian she did not want to counsel me any more. She was afraid that I might try to seduce her. (F29 Finland)*

*When I was on the 10th grade my philosophy teacher asked us to do a paper work about anything that we wanted, I chose homosexuality. He read my paper to the all class, said that homosexuality was a disease and that he didn't believe in bisexuality – but ended with "but I would love to be with two bisexual women". (F18 Portugal)*

*In sex education classes everything was only about heterosexuals. When I asked "what about lesbians?" the lecturer responded that lesbians are not normal as they are unable to bear children. (Hungary F17)*

Language use was shown as an important indicator of teachers' homophobic attitudes. Use of degrading words on LGBT issues were perceived as offensive and threatening. In certain cases politically incorrect vocabulary could also be seen as reflecting the lack of the teachers' knowledge on LGBT issues.

*I was deeply hurt when once one professor at the university during classes said – as a joke – something concerning gays, he referred to gay people using a bad word etc. I felt like I was being directly insulted and I wanted to leave the class. But I didn't. It would have been too obvious and I hadn't enough courage to do it. However, I never visited his classes after that. (Slovenia M26)*

*Some teachers have used strong words against LGBT people – hence I chose not to come out at school. (Italy F19)*

*The prejudices that I came across in primary school were in my opinion caused by teachers' lack of knowledge. It was mostly about using inappropriate words for gays, because they were in my opinion not aware of politically correct or indiscriminate naming for gays. I also remember a teacher who was otherwise not homophobic but still he said he would not allow homosexual partners to adopt children because they would probably become homosexual when grown up. (Slovenia M21)*

In this context the lack of teachers' training to present or handle LGBT issues – in a non-judgemental way – was also emphasised.

*In schools there are no clear guidelines about how to present LGBT issues in the classroom, this is why teachers usually skip the topic. Teachers are not trained to deal with this topic. The only occasion I can remember that the topic was discussed was in the religion class where the debate was already oriented, thus providing a partial sight of the topic. (Italy M25)*

Teachers were also perceived by some respondents as lacking a better understanding of privacy issues. Uninvited inquiries of teachers into the personal lives of students were

interpreted as a lack of respect and recognition. In this respect transgender students could find themselves in specifically problematic situations – especially if their gender designation was seen by teachers as “ambiguous”.

*Two university professors (yes, two professors!) suspected that the relationship between my girlfriend and I didn't stop merely at friendship (we were both in the same class). And it once drove me to tears when they both summoned me to tell me that the 'strange' relationship I have with my girlfriend was putting a strain on my progress, and they tried their best to make me admit that, yes, we were lovers...and also tried to persuade me to stop our 'strange' friendship. (Malta F22)*

*At university I'd say the greatest problem is having the possibility of giving exams without teachers inquiring about our personal lives (there is no possibility up to date of having papers with our “new name” before the operations we trans people must undergo). The same goes for enrolling to the exams without having to be embarrassed about our names with people who know us as the identified gender and not as the one we are born in. (Italy FtM23)*

Lack of openly LGBT teachers – serving as potential positive role models for LGBT students – was also perceived to indicate the general problems of acceptance: *very few if any teachers are openly gay because it's not a conducive environment for employees to be out in either (Ireland M25)*. While until LGBT teachers feel comfortable in being open about their sexual or gender identity, without obscuring promotion chances or attracting censure from colleagues, it seems to be very unlikely that pupils would develop more positive attitudes towards or as LGBT people (McLean – O'Connor 2003).

Having met with openly gay teachers in their school environment was very rarely mentioned (and only by Dutch respondents). Additionally, two respondents reported on fear of discrimination and negative consequences of revealing their non-heterosexuality when working as a teacher:

*I am a teacher myself and I can only say that I live more easily by not being out. If I came out, I am sure I would be discriminated against and I would probably lose my job. I know of two women who lost their jobs because of their sexual orientation: one was working in a kindergarten (as the boss), the other at a school. So for now, I prefer not to talk about it. (Slovenia F34)*

*I was working as a teacher, and many parents and colleagues kept their distance from me when they found out. (Sweden F25)*

4% of those who did not have any negative experiences in school mentioned respectful treatment, acceptance, good attitudes from teachers (though almost exclusively by Dutch respondents): *[as opposed to pupils] teachers were always positive about homosexuality and being gay (Netherlands M20); One teacher commented very positively on the fact that I had come out at high school (Netherlands F22); I was arrested a bit by students when I was still at school but I found excellent support from the teaching staff (Malta M23)*.

### **3.3. Silencing of LGBT issues in the school curriculum**

While 43% of respondents found that their school curriculum expressed prejudice or included discriminative elements targeting LGBT people, more people referred to the lack of representation of LGBT issues in the school curriculum as a deceptive representation of real life. Previous research also indicates that there is a strong need for inclusion and positive

representation of LGBT people – as pupils and/or parents – and their families in the school curriculum: this would be an important step to making pupils more accepting of alternative family structures, and seeing their life experience reflected in the school curriculum would also be very affirmative for both LGBT youth and the children of LGBT parents (McLean – O’Connor 2003).

*The topic of homosexuality was absolutely blanked out – as if it did not exist (Austria M23)*

*Nothing, except the not mentioning of any other sexual orientation or gender identities either than heterosexual and male and female. (Croatia F27)*

*There was nothing in school curriculum about sexual orientation but teachers told us degrading stories and dirty jokes from their life about their experiences of meeting LGBT people. (Belarus F18)*

*Almost all the course books I had in primary school are full of Victorian-era stereotypes and totally outdated realities and this education only prepares children to live in Disneyworld. The school curriculum does not target homosexuals because homosexuality does not even exist within the school curriculum. (Malta F23)*

*Some stereotypes remain: when people are laughing at LGBT within a course the teacher almost never says anything (even at the university). Furthermore we never mention homosexual deportation by the Nazis and there is no prevention against homophobia occurring at the school. (France F18)*

The silencing of LGBT issues in the school curriculum, i.e. the fact that LGBT issues are not included, mentioned or covered in the school curriculum, was interpreted by many respondents as a tool at the institutional level for maintaining LGBT invisibility at school and as such an instance of discrimination in itself.

*Silence is the worst form of discrimination. (Italy FtM26)*

*We never read or heard anything about LGBT people in school. I regard silencing and the maintenance of invisibility a discriminatory practice, too. (Denmark 25)*

*Ignoring homosexuality (or other attempts to fight for tolerance against xenophobia, women’s rights etc.) and not including it into school curriculum already is discrimination. (Slovenia M21)*

*The whole curricular in all disciplines at all levels at secondary, vocational and to a large extent at universities is not gender-sensitive. Even such issues of LGBT as human rights are rarely found in curricula of higher education. The most discriminative element at schools is that LGBT issues are marginalized, omitted, condoned, ignored or presented as deviant, not even worth discussing. (Lithuania M34)*

*Heterosexism permeates education and is very rarely challenged (Hungary FtM29)*

*I think homosexuality is still a taboo in primary in secondary schools. It is not discussed which I also understand as discrimination because I often felt as if I did not exist. The absence of discussion about homosexuality even stimulated my wrong ideas I had at the time. Namely, I got a strong feeling that something is wrong me and that I would somehow have to be medically treated and cured. (Slovenia M21)*

Ignoring non-heterosexual forms of sexuality in sex education and health education classes was shown as a wide spread practice in many countries having dangerous potential consequences on, for example, the sexual health of young LGBT people – as it can be assumed that stigmatization, marginalization and denial make it difficult for young LGBT people who are sexually active to access the information and resources they need to protect their sexual health. Keeping their identity and behaviour secret as well as avoiding seeking out services that they might need can result in the lack of appropriate sexual health service provision, because of the perception that there are not enough young lesbians and gay men who need them (Campbell – Aggleton 1999).

*There is also no sex education for gay people so we are never shown how to have safe sex. (UK F23)*

*Homosexuality was not mentioned in sex education, heterosexual sex was presented as merely reproductive and the only way of expressing sexuality. (Austria M20)*

*It was just assumed that there were no homosexuals in the class and therefore they did not have to tell us about homosexuality in the sex education class. (Denmark F21)*

*Health education concerns hetero couples, sex is described as happening between women and men. (Finland F24)*

Besides references to silencing and ignoring LGBT issues in the school curriculum, the majority of respondents mentioned examples of presenting LGBT issues in negative contexts such as disease, sin, unnatural way of being:

*Only a slight touch during the health lessons a very brief comment that there are some sick people: homosexuals. (Latvia M37)*

*One day our teacher of medicine told us that in 83% of the cases LGBT people are responsible for spreading HIV/AIDS infection (Belarus F16)*

*In medical schools – starting from the secondary school level – homosexuality is mentioned in the context of other diseases such paedophilia, necrophilia etc. (M20 Hungary)*

*In the school curriculum there was something about homosexuality as a form of sexual perversion. (Moldova F25)*

*The first time I have ever seen an LGBT topic in school was during my biology class in the seventh grade of the elementary level school in Slovakia. The teacher showed us (the boys) a film as a part of the sexual education within the biology curriculum. The only time an LGBT person was shown, was a picture of an old man who was trying to treat young boys with sweets in a city park just to lure them into an apartment and abuse them. I felt that this old man was not an identification person to me as a young gay man at that time, however the connection between paedophilia and gay male sexual orientation was just plainly wrong, judgmental and thus discriminating. (Slovakia M27)*

*Religious education curriculum was not itself negative but had an indirect negative effect by not adequately pointing out the fallacies in such beliefs. Christians do not follow the law of Leviticus yet still use it arbitrarily whenever they wish to run-down gay people. (Hungary M21)*

*When I was still taking religion classes (read: clericalism) the priests and Catholic teachers often likened homosexuality to sodomy and other Christian 'sins'. (Poland M16)*

*I learned that homosexuality is not natural in 'family life preparation' class. (Poland F19)*

*In my health education school book homosexuality was dealt with under the chapter on "unusual sexual behaviour". Homosexuality was explained as a product of wrong education, despite the fact that the book stated that one should get rid of all the prejudices about homosexuals. (Slovenia M32)*

Previous research findings have been emphasizing the long tradition of a consistent discursive strategy to classify homosexuality as a mental illness, an indicator of susceptibility to infection, or "stacks of negative fact aim to put you off", adding that "presenting sexuality and sexual identity in the single form of homosexuality is a reductive strategy that actively minoritizes students" who are beginning to identify as LGBT (Ellis – High 2004; 222). Practices of reducing LGBT issues to mainly male homosexuality as well as focusing on sexual aspects instead of applying a broader interpretational framework were witnessed by our respondents too:

*The biggest problem for me is that homosexuality is only viewed at school like sex, never like a sentiment. (Switzerland M17)*

*Homosexuality is rarely discussed, teachers tend not to facilitate any constructive discussions about it – while bisexuals and trans people are completely ignored. (Slovenia F29)*

However, examples of more sensitive treatment of LGBT issues in school curricula as well as of anti-discrimination school policies were also provided. These positive developments were cited mainly from higher educational settings.

*At the university I think information is more precise and correct – especially in courses, such as Sociology, Psychology. (Italy F19)*

*In literature, history we discussed modern challenges of gays' civil rights. In the university I didn't have problems, queer studies were appealing in my course and I graduated from this subject. (Italy M26)*

*We have subjects like Gay and lesbian studies where we can hear more about the queer population in a very positive way. (Slovenia F23)*

*In classes it [the topic of homosexuality] did appear, both at elementary and secondary schools, and then I hoped that no one would notice that I became red and nervous. In these classes we were told that it was normal and prejudice was discredited. (NL F28)*

*My schools have had a policy to take extra care not to discriminate LGBT persons. (Sweden F20)*

*The Swedish LGBT youth organisation, RFST Ungdom, has worked with a project where it was investigated whether Swedish biology books included LGBT people and said the "right" things or not. Most books weren't accepted, and they have been withdrawn from the schools. This project has had a great impact in Sweden and now other institutions has started investigating books in other subjects, and things are getting much better. (Sweden F22)*

## **Conclusion**

Our research findings demonstrated that European LGBT youth face several challenges related to the lack of recognition and full participation opportunities in schools. By applying

Young's structural concept of oppression (1990) to the school context bullying, and the fact that many schools fail to acknowledge it as a problem, can be interpreted as symptoms of systemic anti-LGBT violence, while invisibility and/or distorted representations of LGBT issues in the curriculum can be seen as functions of heteronormative cultural imperialism.

Heteronormative practices of schools were shown to have disempowering effects on young LGBT people: the pervasive silence concerning LGBT experiences and lifestyles contributed to their feelings of isolation and invisibility, resulting in the perception that coming out would endanger their physical and emotional well-being and in their choice of disguising their identities (Quinlivan – Town 1999), often being much time- and energy-consuming activities.

Most educational experts specialized on LGBT issues agree that safe school practices should include the introduction and enforcement of anti-harassment policies to tackle bullying, the encouragement of teachers to come out to serve as role models, and more inclusive curricular representations of LGBT lifestyles. However, certain questions remain unanswered concerning, for example, which LGBT representations are the “right” ones, and what kinds of LGBT life or people should be presented (Talbert 2004).

While this paper did not address country-specific features, accounts of real life experiences of young LGBT people indicated that in many places in Europe social exclusion issues of LGBT people in general and LGBT youth in particular are still in the problem recognition phase. In these contexts awareness-raising (through developing specific educational programmes and materials as well as conducting more research and disseminating their findings) can be seen as crucial means to prevent discrimination and other social exclusion practices.

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<sup>2</sup> European Parliament Resolution 18 January 2006: Homophobia in Europe (P6\_TA-PROV(2006)0018) <http://www.europarl.eu.int/omk/sipade3?TYPE-DOC=TA&REF=P6-TA-2006-0018&MODE=SIP&L=EN&LSTDOC=N>

<sup>3</sup> This research was conducted as part of producing a report on the *Social exclusion of young lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people*, published by ILGA-Europe and IGLYO in April 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Questionnaires were sent to the member organisations of ILGA-Europe and IGLYO, who were asked to collect answers. The questionnaires were also made available on the homepages of ILGA-Europe and IGLYO in seventeen different languages. 68% of the respondents were male, 29% female, 2% transgender and 1% did not give any gender identification. The average age of respondents was 23,7 (median: 22): 60% of respondents were younger than 25, 19% belonged to the 25-29 age group, 20% to the 30-39 age group, while 1% of the respondents were older than 39. Between January and March 2006, ILGA-Europe and IGLYO received 754 individual responses from 37 European countries. More details on the sample: [http://www.ilga-europe.org/europe/publications/non\\_periodical/social\\_exclusion\\_of\\_young\\_lesbian\\_gay\\_bisexual\\_and\\_transgender\\_people\\_lgbt\\_in\\_europe\\_april\\_2006](http://www.ilga-europe.org/europe/publications/non_periodical/social_exclusion_of_young_lesbian_gay_bisexual_and_transgender_people_lgbt_in_europe_april_2006) pp.37-38.

<sup>5</sup> Country of origin, gender (F=female, M=male, FtM=female-to-male transgender, MtF=male-to-female transgender) and age of respondent are provided after each quotation.