

## **The Positive Experiences of Openly Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered Students in a Christian Sixth Form College**

Previous research has demonstrated that LGBT students tend to have negative experiences of school, suffering social marginalisation and discrimination. One key reason for this has been the homophobia of heterosexual male students. However, my research into sixth forms in the south of England has documented a marked change in the attitudes of straight youth, who now espouse pro-gay attitudes. In this article, I explore how this changing social zeitgeist impacts on the school experiences of LGBT youth. Building on a four-month ethnography at a religious sixth form college, I present the experiences of four students: one gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered student. Highlighting the similarities and differences in their experiences, I demonstrate the positive influence decreasing homophobia has on all students, and I argue that it is necessary to focus on combating heteronormativity in school settings. Framing these findings using inclusive masculinity theory, I also explore the extent to which this theory has relevance for women.

**Keywords:** LGBT, students, sixth form, homophobia, inclusive masculinity, transgender

A large body of research documents that homophobia has traditionally pervaded educational institutions (Epstein, O'Flynn and Telford 2003; Ellis and High 2004; Plummer 1999). Here, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) students have been the victims of social marginalisation and anti-gay bullying (D'Augelli, Pilkington and Hershberger 2002; Rivers 2001; Warwick, Aggleton and Douglas 2001). They have also faced institutional policies and curricular that excluded them or even ignored their very existence (see Allen 2007; Epstein and Johnson 1998). It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that research has shown that fewer LGBT youth continue into further and higher education, and that they have elevated levels of absenteeism when compared to their heterosexual peers (Ryan and Rivers 2003; Wilkinson and Pearson 2009).

While there are multiple reasons for homophobia in school settings (Froyum 2007; Plummer 1999), scholarship on masculinities has highlighted the centrality of homophobia in the construction of masculinities (Anderson 2009; Kimmel 1994; Richardson 2010). Heterosexual male students have been shown to use homophobic language and proclaim anti-gay attitudes as a way of demonstrating their own heterosexuality; something required in order to avoid the stigma of homosexuality (Connell 1995; Epstein 1997). Accordingly, the attitudes of heterosexual young men are vital in understanding the extent to which schools are safe spaces for LGBT youth (Anderson 2005; McCormack 2012; Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman 2002).

My research on sixth forms in England has documented that many male youth no longer espouse anti-gay views (McCormack 2011a, 2011b; McCormack and Anderson 2010). Corresponding with a decrease in homophobia in the wider culture (Anderson 2009; Kozloski 2010; Weeks 2007), heterosexual students in the three schools I studied espoused support of gay rights, maintained friendships with openly gay peers and did not use homophobic language. While I documented how this change in attitudes resulted in an expansion of

gendered behaviours for heterosexual boys, I did not provide a detailed examination of school life for LGBT students in these schools (McCormack 2012).

In this article, I examine the experiences of four LGBT students at one of these gay friendly schools. Drawing on 22 in-depth interviews, and four months of participant observation at a Christian sixth form, I discuss the positive school experiences of LGBT students in this inclusive culture. This includes Max, a camp<sup>1</sup>, openly gay student who was elected Student President; Ross, who first came out as lesbian but currently identifies as transgender (FtM); Mary, a lesbian heavily involved in promoting sexual health; and Joshua, a bisexual student who had previously experienced homophobia in school. Using inclusive masculinity theory to frame my data, I demonstrate that these students have not suffered from discrimination or marginalisation at Religious College and that they enjoy their school life. Documenting the benefits of an inclusive school setting for LGBT youth, this article also highlights the pressing need to re-examine our understanding of sixth forms as homophobic spaces and focus on how to combat heteronormativity at lower levels of schooling.

## **Homophobia in Schools**

British schools and sixth forms in the 1980s and 1990s had high levels of homophobia (Redman and Mac an Ghaill 1997; Epstein and Johnson 1998), mirroring that of the broader culture (Anderson 2009; Loftus 2001). Homophobic language was pervasive and LGBT students remained closeted because they feared social marginalisation and physical attack (Ellis and High 2004; Mac an Ghaill 1994; Rivers 2011). Indeed, because of the conflation between gender and sexuality (where masculine girls are perceived as lesbians and feminine boys are labelled gay), students would use homophobia both to demonstrate their own heterosexuality but also to show they conformed to the appropriate gender roles (Schwartz

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<sup>1</sup> In McCormack (2011a), I stated that Max “exhibits flamboyant mannerisms, self-identifying as a queen” (p. 346). Max also referred to himself as ‘camp’, which is one of the reasons I use this term to describe him in this article.

and Rutter 2000). While this conflation of sexuality and gender regulated both boys and girls (Duncan 1999; Epstein, O’Flynn and Telford 2003), it was most powerful in policing acceptable forms of masculinity (Connell 1995; Plummer 1999).

The link between homophobia and masculinity for adolescent males has traditionally been so powerful that Kimmel (1994) described masculinity *as* homophobia. Esteemed gendered behaviours for young men were so restricted that in order to avoid social marginalization, boys had to conform to a homophobic, misogynistic and aggressive code of masculinity (Francis 1999; Pollack 1998). Homophobia was the key mechanism for policing gendered behaviours because anyone can be suspected of being gay in a homophobic culture (Anderson 2008a). This then made it impossible to prove one’s heterosexuality, meaning the use of homophobic language was the most effective way of demonstrating that one was not gay (Anderson 2009; McCormack 2011c).

Retrospective research has demonstrated the deleterious effects this had on LGBT youth in schools. Warwick, Aggleton and Douglas (2001) discussed some of the most negative experiences of homophobia, including extreme acts of physical violence. However, while these visible and traumatic acts served to highlight the visceral power of homophobia at its most powerful, there exists an expansive set of less visible but still-damaging social effects (see Plummer 1999). For example, Flowers and Buston (2001) argued that gay youth felt that they were “defined by difference...[and] are universally described negatively” (p. 54). They highlight how this led to inner psychological turmoil, and a fear if not dread of schooling.

There has also been a growing focus on the implicit and structural ways that heterosexuality is privileged in school systems (Allen 2007; Epstein and Johnson 1998; Ferfolja 2007). Theorised as ‘heteronormativity’, this scholarship highlights the ways in which LGBT youth are excluded through institutional norms. As Ferfolja (2007, p. 160)

argues, “schooling cultures, through institutional processes and representation, reinforce and perpetuate silences and invisibility in relation to non-heterosexual issues and subjectivities”. Whether it be the elision of homosexuality from school curricula (Epstein and Johnson 1998), or the absence of openly gay teachers and role models in schools (Ferfolja 2005); the inadequacy of sex education (Alldred and David 2007) or the after-effects of Section 28 in the UK (Nixon and Givens 2008), the presence of heteronormativity in school settings has been shown to greatly influence the experiences of LGBT youth (Epstein 1994; Sears 1992; Jones and Clarke 2007).

### **Changing Attitudes, Changing Experiences**

While a substantial body of research describes high levels of homophobia from the 1980s to the early 2000s (Ellis and High 2004; Mac an Ghail 1994), there is substantial evidence of a recent and significant decrease in homophobia within school settings (Kehler 2009; McCormack and Anderson 2010; Miceli 2005). In recent research (McCormack 2012), I document that young heterosexual men espouse pro-gay attitudes, maintain friendships with openly gay peers and critically interrogate aspects of the school which they deem to be homophobic. Importantly, they identified practices including the exclusion of homosexuality from the curriculum and the absence of openly gay teaching staff; practices that scholars have labelled heteronormativity (Epstein and Johnson 1998; Snyder and Broadway 2004). This demonstrates that they are not merely passively reproducing dominant attitudes in society, but that they are able to critically apply their views to the institutions in their own lives (McCormack and Anderson 2010).

This ability of students to critically interrogate institutional norms that privilege heterosexuality at the expense of sexual minorities is also reflected in changes to the inspection of schools in the UK. Building on the single Equalities Act, 2010, OfSTED, the

school inspectorate, now compels schools to address seven named areas of equality. Importantly, sexual orientation is one of these ‘protected characteristics’, and failure to address homophobic bullying can result in the school failing inspection. Moreover, the new inspection framework also requires schools to actively *promote* inclusivity and diversity. In this regard, issues of LGBT inclusion in British schools have shifted from a reactive approach to a proactive one, where schools must be able to demonstrate how they promote diversity and inclusivity of sexuality.

Research documenting the decreasing significance of homophobia in school life is supported by qualitative and quantitative studies documenting improving attitudes to homosexuality in both the UK and the US (Anderson 2011; Sherkat et al 2011; Weeks 2007). Indeed, gay rights charity Stonewall reports that 87% of British citizens would be comfortable with their MP being gay, and 86% would be comfortable if a close friend was gay (Cowan, 2007). Weeks (2007:7) describes these positive advances in attitudes toward homosexuality as “the inevitable reality”, and they can be attributable to the rise in gay visibility, the democratising power of the internet and the successes of LGBT politics (see McCormack 2012).

However, while research has documented improving attitudes among heterosexual men and a more inclusive social and cultural climate, limited research examines how this influences LGBT students in schools (Miceli 2005; Savin-Williams 2005). And despite attitudes toward homosexuality improving most rapidly in the UK, most of this research has focussed on American schools. This research finds that Gay Straight Alliances are the key vehicle for making schools safe spaces (see Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, & Laub 2009;

Walls, Kane & Wisneski 2010), which is problematic because these social/political groups are not present in high numbers in UK schools<sup>2</sup>. Accordingly, there is a pressing need to examine how British LGBT students experience school cultures that are not homophobic.

## **Methods**

**Data for this research comes from a four-month ethnography of a large Christian sixth form college, that I call Religious College, in the south of England. Situated just outside Standard Town, students come from the town, the nearby major city and the surrounding rural area. Accordingly, there is a broad range of students, with a spectrum of class and racial groups. Religious College has approximately 1,000 students, aged 16-18 and is not attached to a school. While there are many middle class and academically-able students, there are also students from poorer areas and those retaking earlier qualifications (e.g. GCSEs) and studying on vocational courses.**

**Sixth forms, a non-compulsory stage of education, have often been characterized as less homophobic than earlier years in secondary schooling. While there is undoubtedly some truth to this argument, it is also important to stress that high levels of homophobia have also been documented in sixth forms settings (Redman and Mac an Ghaill 1994; Epstein, O'Flynn and Telford 2003). And while there are several social freedoms at Religious College – for example, there is a smoking area for students, no uniform policy is prescribed, and students are allowed off-campus when not in lessons, the college is nonetheless guided by a Christian ethos that might be expected to uphold socially conservative views concerning gender and sexuality. I discuss the contextual specificity of the sixth form in detail elsewhere (McCormack 2012).**

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<sup>2</sup> Whereas progressive schools in the United States adopt the GSA model, schools in the UK use GSAs, LGBT groups or (more conservatively) Relationships groups.

Part of a wider research project on the attitudes and gendered behaviours of heterosexual male youth (McCormack 2012), this research involved me collecting data with heterosexual as well as LGBT students. While participant observations occurred in classes, free periods and break times, the majority of participation occurred with students out of lessons. Collecting data in student peer group settings proved to be the most fertile area for understanding their attitudes and behaviours (see also O'Donnell and Sharpe 2000). While most of this time was spent with heterosexual male youth, I also collected data with LGBT students. I was able to collect ethnographic data with gay youth in their own social groups (including a 'relationship group', which was effectively a gay youth group), as well as interacting with heterosexual friends and peers in classrooms, the canteen and in other social spaces.

After three weeks collecting data at Religious College, I came out as gay. This was agreed with the college administration in advance, and it enabled me to observe any differences in student behaviour before and after I came out. There were none. I have discussed the influence of this on my data in great detail elsewhere (McCormack 2012), arguing that it did not distort my understanding of heterosexual students' attitudes and behaviours. However, in this article, it is important to highlight that it is likely to have had an extremely positive effect on my interactions with LGBT youth. This is because it enabled me to gain the trust of LGBT students very quickly, who enjoyed being able to talk with me about issues of sexuality.

Given the number of LGBT students at Religious College, I expanded my research focus from collecting data with heterosexual boys to include LGBT youth. There were two reasons for this. The first was that I could use these students' experiences and views of life at Religious College to test the veracity of heterosexual students' statements about homosexuality and their behaviours around me. While I triangulated data in various ways



(McCormack 2012), the experiences of LGBT youth would be a valuable way of corroborating or contradicting my findings regarding heterosexual youth.

The second reason for collecting data with these youth was they provided a valuable insight into the contemporary experiences of LGBT youth in schools today. While statistical generalizations of their experiences will inevitably be limited, it can help understand the impact of the changing attitudes of heterosexuals. While I conducted 22 semi-structured, in-depth interviews for this research, I highlight four cases here. This is to elucidate the lived experience of the individual lesbian, bisexual, gay and transgender student within Religious College. This was in addition to collecting data in several meetings of the 'relationship group' (whose membership was predominantly LGBT students) and dozens of informal conversations with LGBT youth during the four-month ethnography.

The interview schedule was created from the thematic coding of the participant observations; both in relation to participant observations of LGBT youth and in order to triangulate data with heterosexual students experiences and statements. The interview schedule included questions relating to: bullying and harassment; friendship groups; attitudes toward homosexuality and homophobia; as well as perceptions of masculinity, femininity and popularity among peers; experience in previous schools; their own sexuality. The interviews, averaging sixty minutes, were recorded, transcribed and coded using a constant-comparative method of emerging themes (Goetz and LeCompte 1981). A portion of coding was cross-checked by another researcher, who also spent time in the school to validate my interpretations of participant observations (LeCompte and Goetz 1982).

### **Results: Max's Story**

Although the traditional experiences of gay youth in school have been defined by feelings of fear, isolation and difference (Flowers and Buston 2001), this is not the case for the gay

students at Religious College. This is perhaps best exemplified by the story of Max<sup>3</sup>, an openly gay 17 year old, who was elected Student President. As I discussed elsewhere (McCormack 2011a), Max used his sexuality as part of his campaign to be elected. With rainbow borders on his posters and by arguing that gay rights are a necessary part of a free and fair society, Max won the support of his heterosexual and LGBT peers alike. As one sporty straight student commented to him, “You’re so gay – you’ve got my vote!”

A camp, intellectual student, Max enjoyed debating gay rights beyond the hustings events of the Student President campaign. However, Max said that he had “grown bored” of debating them. He commented, “Debating gay rights has just got really boring because everyone agrees with me. The only time I get any argument going is if I say the blood ban is homophobic”. When I suggested that they may not be telling him their honest views because they did not want to offend him, he replied, “Even the religious ones who think that gay sex might be a sin are really apologetic about it”, he said. “I force it out of them, and they’re really not nasty about it”.

Not able to use his gay identity as a way of provoking discussion on issues of sexuality, Max preferred to talk about his sexual proclivity. One day during registration, his tutor group discussed relationships and the right time to have sex. After a female student, Heather, said, “I believe you should wait for someone you’re in love with, it’s better then”, Max responded by saying, “I totally disagree. I’m a slut. I first got fucked when I was 16, and since then I’ve had sex with 51 guys”. Ignoring Max’s comment, the teacher asked Heather to expand on her opinion.

In interview, Max said that he liked to talk about sex because his peers found it interesting and provocative. He said, “Look, some people, and girls in particular, think it’s bad that I’m slutty, but most find it funny”. Furthermore, Max argued that while teachers

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<sup>3</sup> In certain previous publications, I have referred to Max as ‘John’. To maintain clarity across my publications on this school, I highlight that it was necessary to change his pseudonym in my book, where I first referred to him as Max.

sometimes ignored his comments about his sex life, he did not have negative experiences from attending a faith school. He said:

I don't get hassle from anyone, not even the sporty kids. Look, I get to wear what I want, I get to talk about sex, and the religious thing – it's just a pretense really. Hell, I'm gay, I'm slutty, I'm an atheist and I'm student president. And the Principal loves me.

Even though Max enjoyed talking about his sexual identity, his sexuality did not seem to define his experiences of school (see Savin-Williams 2005). Rather, Max was more concerned with being a young, sexually active man than he was with being a *gay* man (see McCormack 2012 for an extended discussion of this).

This lack of being defined by sexuality is also supported by the lack of problems Max experienced when he came out at school. Realising he was gay when aged 11, Max said that he came out at 15. "I wasn't ready to before, but I kind of wish I had come out earlier", he said. "My friends were totally cool with it, and there was only a little bit of homophobia. But the school stamped that out pretty quickly". When I asked if he might view his coming out experiences differently since his positive experiences at Religious College, he responded by saying, "Not really. It was really important for me to come out, and in a perfect world I wouldn't have stayed closeted 'til 15. But waiting that long meant I really didn't encounter much homophobia".

Max's portrayal of an inclusive and happy time at Religious College was supported by my participant observations. I did not observe social marginalization or harassment of Max, or any other LGBT student, in any form. Instead, he was popular with a wide range of students, including those who did not share an interest in his discussions of sexuality. Elected student president, Max is an exemplar of how openly gay students can flourish in schools where heterosexual boys espouse pro-gay attitudes.

## **Ross's Story**

The experience of transgendered students in school is under examined (see Grossman and D'Augelli 2006; Gutierrez 2004; Namaste 2000). Given this, it is, however, generally accepted that transgender students face social marginalization as well as discursive abuse (see Kosicw, Greytak, Diaz and Bartkiewicz 2009). Ross, however, spoke positively about his experiences at Religious College.

When Ross first attended Religious College, he identified as a lesbian. After being closeted for the first few weeks of term, he then came out as a lesbian—receiving a positive reaction from his friends. “It wasn’t an issue for them. But some of my friends were already out as lesbians, and others had always suspected I think, so you know, it was no big deal”. Highlighting the importance of a holistic education about sexuality (see Alldred and David 2007), Ross initially thought that he was lesbian:

It was only when we had this person in from [names LGBT group], that I realized I was trans. Before that I just thought I was a lesbian, and one that didn’t feel right.

Then when I heard this, I just knew what I was.

A month later, and before I started data collection at Religious College, Ross decided to tell friends that he was going to change his name and start using the male pronoun. “Some seemed to understand, especially Jo [a lesbian friend]” he said, “But others needed me to spell it out for them”. Somewhat surprisingly, Ross said he encountered no overt hostile reaction, saying “I lost some friends when I said that. They just gradually started seeing me less and less. But I’ve made new friends, too”. Supporting this, Ross also maintained that he has not been harassed since coming out; something confirmed by my participant observations, as I often saw Ross in the canteen and other social areas and never observed him being bullied or marginalized.

While Ross had a close group of friends who offered him a great deal of emotional support, his family life was more troubled. Estranged from his father, Ross lived with his mother who had difficulty coping with Ross's coming out.

She called me by my old name for ages. She's changed that now, but she won't pay for my surgery, so as soon as I'm 18 I'm getting it done. She loves me, but doesn't understand how much it hurts me as well.

While Ross was glad that his mother was becoming more supportive, he also critiqued the legal framework which the school operated in. Highlighting this, he said "They call me Ross, which is great, but for exams and stuff I'm [says birth name]. I hate it, but the school don't have an option". Here, despite the good intentions of the school administration, Ross found his agency and opinions ignored because of heteronormative, exclusionary government policy.

Notwithstanding this issue, Ross said that he felt generally supported by the school administration. Teachers called him by his new (assumed) name, and referred to him using the male pronoun. Even so, one issue at Religious College that Ross described difficulty in negotiating was the use of toilets (see Nakamura 1998). While he felt the administration had been helpful and sympathetic to his situation, it was suggested to Ross that he use the disabled toilets. While Ross was upset by this, he also said that he did not feel comfortable using the boys' toilets. He said, "I'm not going to use the girls toilets, and using the boys toilets would be... I dunno. So, I guess the disabled was their best option". Ross also commented that the administration was investigating whether he could use the staff toilets, some of which were unisex—something he felt would be a positive resolution of the situation. Even so, this example clearly highlights some of the issues that are unique to trans students, the emotional cost of which is difficult to estimate.

When thinking about his life as a transgendered student, Ross felt comfortable and safe at Religious College yet also unhappy about the tribulations he has had to endure. He summarised his situation by saying, “I’m alright you know, but it should just be better”.

### **Mary’s Story**

I first met Mary in ‘smoker’s corner’ on the playing fields at Religious College. With dyed-purple hair and smoking a rolled cigarette, Mary was talking to her friends about sexual health: “You might find protection makes sex less enjoyable, but that’s being unimaginative. My partner can do wonderful things with a dental dam”. Her friends, a sub-cultural group of students with long hair, black clothes, several of whom had painted nails, listened attentively. In interview, Mary commented that she took sexual health as an important part of social life: “I got help from [names LGBT group] who told me about sexual health, I wouldn’t have known otherwise. But it’s important, and I don’t think my straight friends have the same information”.

Although Mary viewed herself as a “bit of an outsider”, she also commented that she had not faced homophobia at the school. “I selected my friends quite carefully I guess, but no one gave me any aggro”. Indeed, Mary argued that the expression of homophobia was stigmatised at Religious College. “There are some guys who are probably a bit homophobic, but they know not to show it. It wouldn’t be tolerated by most of us round here. The teachers would react to it as well”. This view was supported by my ethnographic observations, as I never saw overt forms of homophobia, instead arguing that homophobia had indeed become stigmatized at Religious College (McCormack 2012).

While Mary had a very positive experience of being openly lesbian at Religious College, she commented that she waited until sixth form to come out. “It wasn’t because I thought I’d get beaten up”, she said, “but I just felt people might be a bit more mature”. She

also commented that some girls at her school could be “a bit bitchy”, and she worried that her lesbianism might be used as a way of attacking her.

Her interview also indicated that stereotypes of lesbians persist in the secondary school: “there was this idea that lesbians hate men and are really butch, so I think they would have been surprised if I came out anyway”. However, the stereotyping was gendered, as she commented, “that’s the girls who did that, the guys just assume lesbians are super hot and want to have sex with them. They could be pretty stupid like that”.

Mary also regularly attended the relationship group at Religious College. Set up in response to student campaigning for an LGBT group, the group was viewed as a safe yet transient space for sexual minority youth. “I like it at the group”, Mary said, “but I think it’s here because we campaigned for it. I’m not sure next year, when we’ve gone, whether it will still be going”. However, Mary did not seem too concerned by this as she questioned the utility of the group. “It’s great for us, because we’re political and organise campaigns, but there are gay students who don’t come, because they’re happy just hanging out with their mates”.

### **Joshua’s Story**

Joshua was a thin, feminine 17 year old who joined Religious College half-way through the school year. Moving from a northern city, he spoke of having a troubled school life before attending Religious College. “I came out as bisexual when I was 15, and that was a really bad idea. I got harassed a lot, by a couple of guys in particular, and Year 11 was a misery really”. While he was never physically attacked, Joshua did feel threatened attending the school: “There were a lot of rough guys, and a lot of fights. I wouldn’t have been able to fight back, so walking home was always scary”. **Joshua’s school was located in the Midlands, and from his description was situated in a poor area of a major city. This would support**

**other research which highlights geography and class intersect with homophobia to affect students' experiences (Taylor 2007).**

Joshua also highlighted, however, that the school had wide-ranging behavioural and management issues.: “We had gangs at the school, and this teacher got assaulted by students. It was a really bad school in a lot of ways. I was so glad my Dad got a new job and we had to move south”. Even so, Joshua did not escape homophobia entirely:

I came out to my family, and my parents were great, but my brother got really upset. He's older than me, and while he didn't hit me, he kind of hurt me when I told him, pushing me away and telling me to fuck off. We're better now, but he still doesn't get it.

Despite Joshua having experienced homophobia, he did not modify his gendered behaviours in response to this (see Mac an Ghail 1994). When I interviewed him, he was wearing pink nail varnish and a large woman's belt, his wispy, blond hair dyed with blue and pink streaks. Commenting that he liked to dress up in more feminine ways, Joshua added that there was no point changing his behaviours: “I came out as bisexual because I could hardly hide it”. Laughing, he added, “I mean, do you think I could hide it?”

Supporting what others have found with bisexual students in school (Pallotta-Chiarolli 2010), Joshua struggled with identifying as bisexual. “To me, my sexuality isn't about being with a guy or a girl”, he said. “I'm not attracted to *men* or *women*, I'm attracted to the person”. When I asked why he identified as bisexual, he said “I call myself that because it's easiest, but really, I'm pansexual. I'm attracted to *people*”. While Joshua did not seem to modify his gendered behaviours, he did, however, limit discussion of his sexual identity. “I could talk to everyone about it, but they have a hard enough time figuring out what bisexuality is, I don't bother explaining being a pansexual”.



Perhaps because of the homophobia he had experienced at his previous school, Joshua enjoyed attending Religious College. This is perhaps more noteworthy because he had yet to meet the majority of LGBT students at the school. Interviewing him in his fourth week at Religious College, Joshua said “I know there are other gay kids, but I haven’t really met any of them yet. I’ve seen Max about but I haven’t spoken to him yet”. When I asked why this was, he said, “No reason – I’ve been happy enough floating round, getting used to stuff. I’ll try and go to the relationship group soon, but actually I prefer just painting at lunch”. While Joshua’s experiences of homophobia highlight that not all schools are free from anti-gay prejudice, his story confirms both the pro-gay environment of Religious College and also the acceptance by heterosexual students of a diverse range of people.

## **Discussion**

This article examined the experiences of four LGBT students at a large, diverse sixth form in the south of England. Despite being a religious school and thus being mandated to uphold a socially conservative moral code, I had previously shown that students at the school supported gay rights and did not engage in overt forms of homophobia (McCormack 2011a, 2012). While I had examined the experiences of LGBT students as a way of corroborating the statements and behaviours of heterosexual students at the schools, I had not provided an in-depth exploration of the experiences of LGBT students at Religious College. This article addresses this gap and shows that while specific issues continue to exist for the LGBT students, their experiences are much more positive than the previous literature has demonstrated (see Warwick, Aggleton and Douglas 2001).

**The importance of these findings are not located in some form of generalisation to all LGBT youth, as ethnographic research cannot make such claims. Rather, and in addition to providing empirical and contemporary examples of the lived experiences of**

**sexual minority youth, the rich data provided here about LGBT students' experiences in a Christian college with diverse race and class demographics – all issues which have been documented to lead to elevated levels of homophobia – can nonetheless contribute to our conceptual understandings of the impact of decreasing homophobia among LGBT youth and how best to theorise this social change.**

That decreasing homophobia among heterosexual men results in better experiences for LGBT youth is perhaps unsurprising. However, while this article highlights the continuing importance of heterosexual students' attitudes for the well-being of LGBT youth, it also illuminates some of the limitations of this model.

The benefits are both clear and substantive: the absence of harassment and the lack of bullying can only lead to improved self-confidence and emotional well-being (see Rivers 2011). Furthermore, the visibility of these students, particularly Max as student president, is likely to further erode at homophobic and heteronormative beliefs, as well as providing a role model for other sexual minority youth (Adams and Anderson, in press). However, this article also addresses the limits that positive changes in heterosexual students' attitudes have on the school experiences of LGBT youth. While all four students believed homophobia was stigmatised at Religious College and felt supported by the administration, only Max felt his sexuality did not impact negatively in some way: Joshua felt unable to discuss his sexual identity openly; Mary was angered by stereotypes of lesbians; and Ross had to battle governmental policy that did not recognise his identity or agency. Of course, this is also attributable to the fact that bisexuals, lesbians and transgender students face unique oppressions that are distinct from gay men's (Pallotta-Chiarolli 2010; Sanger 2010). Even so, this article also demonstrates that decreasing homophobia also involves decreased biphobia and transphobia (McCormack, Adams and Anderson in press).

**It could be argued that the participants downplayed some of the more negative experiences of homophobia, given that some people downplay personal experiences of inequalities, wanting to emphasise a broader view of their identity. However, this argument is not persuasive on two counts. First, relative deprivation theory would support the notion that, if anything, LGBT students would compare their experiences with their heterosexual peers and feel that their experiences were *negative*. Second, part of the power of ethnographic research is the triangulation of rich data collected, and participant observations supported the interview data. While qualitative research is always interpretive, this supports the idea that these students were not significantly downplaying experiences of marginalization.**

These findings can be best explained through inclusive masculinity theory (Anderson 2009), which also accounts for the experience of women. Building on the notion that homophobia is central to the stratification of masculinities (Connell 1995; Plummer 1999), Anderson argued that it was the fear of being socially perceived as gay, rather than any inherent anti-gay prejudice, that regulates gendered behaviours. Labelling this fear ‘homohysteria’, he demonstrated that as homohysteria decreases, the stratification of men moves from a hierarchical to a horizontal ordering. Not only do men cease to regulate and bully each other to maintain popularity (McCormack 2011b), they are able to behave in more inclusive ways: As homohysteria and (therefore) homophobia decrease, the barriers to physical and emotional intimacy fall away which in turn erodes homophobic attitudes. And as heterosexual men enact increasingly tactile and feminized behaviours, this expunges the stigma from these acts and simultaneously permits gay men to act in these ways as well.

Inclusive masculinity theory also has relevance for the reproduction of patriarchy in society. Anderson’s theory emerged as a response to the failings of hegemonic masculinity theory to explain the contemporary stratification of masculinities among male youth (see

Anderson 2011; McCormack 2012). Accordingly it addresses the same concerns that hegemonic masculinity theory addressed, which included the position of women in society. Connell (1995) defined hegemonic masculinity as the current configuration of gender practices that provided the answer to the problem of patriarchy. Discussing ‘emphasized femininity’, Connell argued that hegemonic masculinity helped keep women subordinated in society. This should mean that masculinities becoming more inclusive should have a positive effect on women, as Anderson (2009) argues.

Anderson (2008b) has demonstrated that this is the case in mixed-sex sport teams where men play alongside and work with women. My research also supports the contention that inclusive masculinities are good for women: elsewhere I have highlighted how the boys at Religious College did not talk about their female peers as ‘sluts’ or ‘whores’ (McCormack 2011a), and this article also demonstrates the beneficial aspects of inclusive masculinities. Unlike previous research suggest (Epstein 1997b), Mary did not experience sexual (or sexist) harassment. However, the limitations of this progression are also evident: heterosexist stereotypes of lesbians continued to pervade heterosexual students’ thinking. Nonetheless, the school environment for Mary was improved on what earlier research would indicate.

Accordingly, this article demonstrates that there are a diverse range of experiences for LGBT youth in sixth form education today. Contrary to earlier research (Epstein 1994; Warwick, Aggleton and Douglas 2001), it is possible for LGBT youth to have positive experiences of secondary education free from harassment and fear. However, this article also highlights implicit ways in which these students can feel marginalised in school. I have argued elsewhere for the need to study and combat the operation of heteronormativity in schools (McCormack and Anderson, 2010), and I have examined how this affects teachers in higher education (Ripley, Anderson, McCormack and Rockett, in press). I maintain that while it is important to continue to challenge homophobia when it occurs, it is vital to focus on

disrupting heteronormativity and ensuring that the gains made against homophobia in schools are built on to ensure positive school experiences for all sexual minority youth.

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