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Research Report

Background

There is now an established body of research documenting the long-term detrimental effects of homophobia and transphobia, both in the UK (Cull, Platzer, & Balloch, 2006; Whittle, Turner, & Al-Alami, 2007) and in places as diverse as Brazil (Moita-Lopes, 2006), Canada (Dalley & Campbell, 2006), Spain (Lanaspa & Galán, 2006) and the US (McCready, 2004). Research focusing specifically on education has explored the active and passive maintenance of heteronormativity through the everyday routines of school life (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Epstein, O'Flynn, & Telford, 2003; Mac an Ghaill, 1994) and the performance and policing of gender and sexuality in school contexts (Nayak & Kehily, 1996; Renold, 2005; Youdell, 2006). The *No Outsiders* project, however, has broken new ground in interrogating the processes of hetero-gender normativity through participatory action research specifically focused on primary education settings.

No Outsiders grew directly out of the project leaders' earlier research (Atkinson, 2007; Atkinson & DePalma, 2007, 2008a, 2008b; DePalma & Atkinson, 2006, 2007b, in press-a) in which four key themes were identified as the basis for further investigation:

- The invisibility of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) parents in schools, despite the likelihood of their presence in the community, and despite the impact of the Civil Partnership Act (2005)
- The lack of representation, for children in families with same-sex parents (or other relatives), of their everyday life experiences within and beyond the school curriculum
- The tendency of teachers (whether heterosexual or non-heterosexual) to take a reactive rather than a proactive approach to addressing sexualities equality, where it is addressed at all
- The underestimation by teachers of the significance of homophobic bullying in primary schools.

The *No Outsiders* project was designed to address these themes while generating further research questions arising from participants' own contexts and experience. Unusually, the large research

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team employed a range of approaches to intervention and analysis which, in bringing together action research, queer theory and LGBT rights discourses and activism, generated both productive tensions and varying outcomes across the project's research sites. Thus visible classroom interventions stemming from an LGBT rights perspective with a clear social justice agenda (such as the use of stories, drama, music and the visual arts, as well as the reframing of school policies and practices to address LGBT equalities) were complemented by less visible, unplanned moments informed by queer theory that offered the possibility of deeper processes of interruption/disruption of the norm. Together, these interventions addressed the philosophy and ethos of both the formal and informal spaces of the participating research sites and challenged the thinking of the teachers, pupils, parents and community members who interacted with them.

Objectives

The project's objectives were:

1. To add to the understanding of the operation of heteronormativity within primary school contexts
2. To develop effective means of challenging this heteronormativity
3. To create a community of practice within which teachers can develop effective approaches to addressing sexualities equality within the broader context of inclusive education
4. To enhance teacher professional development and autonomy through action and critical reflection.

We can state with confidence that the objectives of the research were achieved, while recognising that they relate to ongoing processes rather than finite goals. The objectives underpinned the development of specific research questions, which are addressed in detail in 'results'. Objectives 1 and 2 were met as teacher-researchers observed the operation of heteronormativity in their own practice settings, analysed these processes in collaboration with university-based colleagues and devised local practice-based responses. Objective 3 was

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achieved through the generation of a collaborative network between participants via face to face meetings, email communications and the team-members' password-protected web forum.

Objective 4 was achieved through the ways in which the creation of this community of practice facilitated collaborative critical reflection leading to further action, a model of participatory action research which contributed substantially to participants' professional development.

Ironically, the intense and sometimes sensationalist media coverage of the project's work (see Annex 3) and the responses this generated both within and beyond the project team, further strengthened both the community of practice we had created (Objective 3) and the professional development and autonomy resulting from the project (Objective 4). The opportunity to communicate via the media also enabled us to convey in appropriate language to a wide public audience the ways in which heteronormativity both operates and can be challenged in and through primary education (Objectives 1 and 2).

Another indication of the success of the project in meeting its objectives is the level of formal and informal recognition received by participating teacher-researchers: they were collectively awarded a British Educational Research Association/Sage Publishers *Research Into Practice* Award in 2008, several have received individual recognition for their *No Outsiders* work from professional agencies and many have been invited to share their work at professional dissemination events.

Methods

The *No Outsiders* research team comprised 26 practitioner-researchers based in 16 primary education settings in North East England, South West England and London and the Midlands; 9 university researchers based at the University of Sunderland, the University of Exeter and the Institute of Education, University of London; a diversity trainer/media officer; a project administrator and a number of educational/arts facilitators who became integral to the team's community of practice. We worked with children from pre-school (birth to 4) to age 11, from a wide range of class, cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds in a wide variety of settings, ranging in size from less than 100 to over 400 on role, in socio-economic circumstances from far fewer than average free school meals to well above average, in number of pupils with special

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educational needs from significantly less than average to significantly more, and in language from settings where English was the first language of all pupils to others where a high proportion of pupils used English as an additional language. The religious background of pupils ranged from predominantly Christian to predominantly Muslim to non-religious; two of the project settings were Church of England schools: one voluntary aided and the other voluntary controlled.

Further details of the research settings are as follows: one suburban pre-school serving a largely white British working-class community; three suburban primaries serving largely white British communities, two serving mainly working-class and one serving a mixture of middle- and working-class families; one small village Church of England school serving a largely white British mixed-class population; one inner-city Church of England school serving a largely black and minority ethnic population (of which the majority are Muslim) including a large number of refugees and asylum seekers, and a second (community) school in the same area, serving the same population; a school in an ex-mining village serving a largely white British working-class population; a school in a small market-town serving a largely white British, mixed social class community; three inner-city primaries in large cities, serving largely white British working-class and middle-class communities, but also encompassing socially and culturally diverse intakes, and three primaries in London boroughs serving mixed middle-class and working-class communities and encompassing a wide range of linguistic, cultural and religious backgrounds.

We also worked with the staff, parents and governors in these settings, providing preliminary training and ongoing support. Each setting had one or more designated ‘project teacher:’ these practitioner-researchers took responsibility for advancing project work and liaising with the project team. Two further practitioner-researchers were a PSHCE (personal, social, health and citizenship education) advisor in a London borough and a tutor in primary teacher training at a Higher Education Institution, who advanced project work with a borough advisory team and with trainee teachers respectively.

Our geographically widespread team developed a strong sense of cohesion through our collaborative approach to data collection and analysis and our shared concern for democracy within the research process. We adopted a participatory action research (PAR) approach because

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of the emphasis on social action as an immediate goal (rather than theory building without praxis) and the potential for analysis of ongoing practice (rather than the investigation of generalized phenomena that may or may not later be applied to a specific situation). Based on Somekh's (2005) model of a global action research community, *No Outsiders* derived particular benefits from collaboration within and across communities of practice. Thus the practitioner-researchers within the project team generated the goals and objectives of their action research based on their classroom expertise and concerns, while their university-based colleagues took on the role of critical friends, drawing on a range of interpretive frameworks (Campbell, McNamara, & Gilroy, 2004). This ongoing collaborative interrogation took us beyond the doing/thinking binary sometimes implied by 'reflective practice.' In addition, it disrupted the traditional separation between 'researcher' and 'researched', particularly through the shared ownership of data and the collaborative, reciprocal approach to data analysis adopted as part of the democratic principles of the project, which gave all participants an equal right to participate in analysis, and exempted no members of the team from the analytical spotlight. A further significant feature of the project was the freedom of each practitioner-researcher to address the project's aims, and the research questions which emerged from them, in their own ways. This led to a wide range of approaches and interpretive responses, leading to a richly varied application of the project's underlying principles. While we recognised that these steps did not dissolve the theory/practice hierarchy (see 'results'), these were important processes in establishing a democratic community of practice.

All team members were invited to participate in data analysis from the outset as part of the developing research process. A password-protected web site formed an innovative virtual research space for the collection and analysis of data, where team members' contributions to a shared discussion forum comprised both data and data analysis. Over the course of the project, the team generated over 200 discussion threads exploring a wide range of project-related issues. In addition, each practitioner-researcher had an interactive data folder on the website, to which extracts from transcripts of regular face-to-face research discussions between university researchers and practitioner-researchers, as well as negotiated selections from field notes, journal reflections, lesson plans and classroom work, were uploaded for discussion and analysis. Selected email communications were also analysed as data. Emerging data from team-members'

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earlier work (see ‘background’) provided initial themes and codes for analysis, but this analysis was developed further as members of the research team brought their own diverse perspectives and expertise to the research. As part of this fluid dialogic process, new discussion threads generated by team members automatically created both new data and new themes for analysis, and the website’s search facility enabled team members to bring together data within and beyond discussion threads, generating further themes for analysis.

Results

We have used the research questions generated from our original objectives as the framework for the presentation of results below, where we also identify team-members’ publications and presentations, arising directly from the project, in which specific themes are analysed in greater depth. Findings relate to data gathered across all research sites unless otherwise indicated. Research questions are numbered for convenience, but numbering does not indicate relative significance.

Note: while we are acutely aware of the implications of not identifying key factors such as race, class, gender and disability/special educational needs in analysing work in the classroom, we have not made explicit analyses in relation to these factors. We found more similarities than differences in both children’s and adults’ responses, both across all our research sites and within any one site, regardless of differences in race, class, gender or disability/SEN. Themes relating specifically to faith are analysed in 7 below.

Research questions and related findings

1. What are the key factors that a) facilitate and b) constrain LGBT equalities work in primary schools?

Key facilitating factors were:

- Teachers’ sense that they had permission to carry out the work as a legitimate part of their professional activity
- Personal and professional support (from management, colleagues, etc.)
- Leadership and/or endorsement by management at school and Local Authority level
- Knowledge of relevant government legislation and guidance

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- Developing understanding of conceptual tools for thinking about sexualities and gender identities
- Provision of training and resources.

Key constraints were:

- Fear of opposition from parents and/or colleagues
- Fear of adverse media coverage
- Sexualisation of gay identities in the perceptions of teachers, parents, governors and media
- Lack of support from management at school and Local Authority level
- The personal and professional strain for participants arising from engaging in a project perceived to be high-risk and controversial.

2. How can sexual orientation and gender expression be addressed for children in ways that are relevant to their experience and growing understanding of personal identity, relationships and family diversity?

We found that children from pre-school to age 11 were able to relate appropriately to both sexual orientation and gender variance. Children developed their understanding, not only by drawing on information gained from the media (for example, knowledge of gay or lesbian figures in popular culture; news coverage of a pregnant trans man; sexual minorities caricatured in television programmes such as *Little Britain*) but also by relating to friends', family members', and even their own experiences of exclusion for perceived sex/gender/sexuality transgressions (see, for example, Allan, Atkinson, Brace, DePalma, & Hemingway, 2008; Atkinson & DePalma, 2009; DePalma, 2009; DePalma & Atkinson, 2008a; Nixon & Givens, 2008b). However, the risks associated with what was perceived as a controversial area of education often led practitioners to adopt safer approaches than they might be inclined to use with other equalities work (Nixon, 2009) while the silencing of popular cultures and the curricular constraints within primary classrooms sometimes prevented the exploration of fruitful ways of interrogating and subverting gender and sexuality norms (Cullen & Sandy, 2009).

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3. How can this work be extended across and beyond the curriculum, and are any specific curricular areas of particular value?

Project teacher-researchers addressed LGBT equalities through incorporating inclusive literature and other teaching resources and strategies (e.g. video materials, drama techniques, arts activities) throughout the curriculum as well as through extra-curricular activities (Allan, et al., 2008; *No Outsiders* Project Team, in press). Literature and the creative and performing arts were found to be particularly powerful tools for drawing upon pupils' and teachers' imaginations to challenge accepted norms (Cullen & Teague, 2008a; DePalma, 2009; DePalma & Atkinson, 2007a), including critical analyses of children's literature (Youdell, 2009). In addition, teacher-researchers made less visible but crucial interventions in the everyday patterns of school life, through spontaneous but persistent challenges to hetero- and gender-normative assumptions, including responding in counter-normative ways to children's and adults normative claims or actions, designing materials and activities that disrupt gender and/or relationship expectations, exploring sex/gender variance in nature and presenting children with examples of LGBT people (including of teachers) that challenge their preconceived notions (Atkinson & DePalma, 2008b, 2009; Cullen & Teague, 2008a; DePalma & Atkinson, 2007a).

4. How can teachers' own positionings support or constrain classroom challenges to norms of sexuality and gender expression?

Across a team of researchers and facilitators which included members who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and heterosexual, we found that different positionings (both explicit and implicit) in relation to sexual orientation and gender expression, and their intersections with other factors (such as gender, age, academic and professional standing), were found to convey different affordances and constraints (Allan, Hemingway, & Jennett, 2007; DePalma & Teague, 2008). Some heterosexual members expressed initial discomfort at feeling like 'outsiders' for the first time and/or feeling as if they did not fully understand the issues of sexualities equality, while some non-heterosexual team members felt concerned that addressing LGBT equalities might place them in a particularly vulnerable position. The relative silencing of bisexual and transgender identities was also an issue of concern within the team (see 5 below) while the exploration of queering practices as an alternative to identifying fixed categories of sexual orientation or gender expression was largely, though not exclusively, perceived by

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teachers as the addition of unmanageable complexities to an already complex terrain (Atkinson & Moffat, 2009; Teague, in press; Youdell, 2009).

Some project teachers who identified as lesbian or gay used their own sexuality as a way to challenge stereotypes. Although we were wary of the essentialising nature of a role model discourse, we analysed the potential of the introduction of gay as well as gender-transgressive bodies into educational spaces to unsettle norms around permissible, legible identities in school contexts (Allan, et al., 2008; Atkinson & DePalma, 2009; Atkinson & Moffat, 2009; DePalma, 2009; Stewart, in press). There remained a division of opinion as to whether labelling categories of identity and/or identifying oneself (or others) as lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans served to broaden understandings of sexual and gender diversity or simply reinforced existing norms. However, we found evidence that both categorising identities *and* blurring identity boundaries produced shifts in children's and adults' understanding and awareness. Finally, in some cases, involvement in the project rekindled dormant activism (suppressed by the demands of contemporary educational discourses of compliance) for which participants drew variously on discourses of neoliberalism, identity politics and queer theory (Atkinson, 2008; Youdell, 2009).

5. How do approaches to bisexual and transgender equalities mesh with approaches to lesbian and gay equalities?

While some teacher-researchers deliberately focused specifically on lesbian, gay *and* bisexual identities as part of their teaching, we found that bisexuality tended to be marginalised both by work focusing specifically on lesbian and gay identities and by work which challenged gender and sexuality norms and categories (Atkinson & Moffat, 2009). Gender expression and gender variance were also under-addressed within the overall scope of the project: a factor which we tried to remedy in the second year of the project through introducing and analysing work focusing explicitly on gender identity, working with Jay Stewart of *Gendered Intelligence*, in several of the project schools. We found evidence that gender transgressions are often automatically interpreted as signifying existing or potential same-sex desire in children (DePalma & Atkinson, 2007a) but that it is possible for both children and adults to challenge these assumptions, and the norms which underpin them, through critical inquiry. We also found that trans perspectives can productively critique fundamental understandings of gender to the

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benefit of all children, and that children can adopt mature and appropriate understandings of diverse gender expressions (DePalma, 2009).

6. What kinds of preparatory work are helpful, and how can colleagues', parents' and governors' concerns be addressed?

In all settings, we found that staff training enabled practitioners to explore often unvoiced concerns and misconceptions, and that this was most effective when both teaching and non-teaching staff were involved. Training which moved beyond discourses of tolerance and victimhood towards a deeper understanding of the social reinforcement of sexuality and gender norms was found to be most effective in challenging unquestioned assumptions (DePalma & Atkinson, in press-b). Further preparatory work in schools varied widely depending on the local context (Atkinson, DePalma, & Snowball, 2007). Some teachers rewrote policy to include LGBT equalities more explicitly, others described planned project work to parents and/or governors, others provided diversity workshops for parents. Some teachers felt that providing special information concerning LGBT work would undermine its validity in relation to other areas of equality, and implemented new strategies as part of their day-to-day teaching (DePalma, in press-b; Givens & Nixon, 2008b).

We found that colleagues', parents' and governors' concerns usually resulted from the false assumption that the project's work involved either implicit or explicit teaching about gay sex. We found that these concerns were addressed most effectively where homophobia, transphobia and heteronormativity were challenged as cultural phenomena (like racism) that should be addressed as social justice issues (DePalma & Jennett, 2007) and that this process was facilitated by ensuring that LGBT equalities work was not confined to the SRE (Sex and Relationship Education) curriculum.

7. How can LGBT equality be approached in faith contexts?

We found that a significant factor inhibiting progress in approaching sexualities equality from a faith perspective was the lack of clarity in legislation. Another was the tension felt between concerns about racism and concerns about homophobia, where challenging faith-based objections to sexualities equality work might be interpreted as racial or religious discrimination.

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We found that the way forward lay in seeking out commonalities rather than focusing on differences, but that this was never an easy process (Givens & Nixon, 2008a; Nixon, 2008; Nixon & East, 2008; Nixon & Givens, 2008a).

Opposition to the work of the project often derived from faith positions (Brace, 2009) even when individual opponents were not adherents to these faiths. However, the project also encountered support from faith groups as well as opposition not based on faith grounds. Team members' own relative familiarity with Christianity, compared with a general lack of familiarity with other religions, may partially account for the greater success in addressing objections based on Christianity than those from other religions. The link with Christianity (which itself, of course, holds a range of positions on sexuality) was perhaps reinforced by the fact that the project title is based on the Archbishop Desmond Tutu's vision that 'Everyone is an insider, there are no outsiders – whatever their beliefs, whatever their colour, gender or sexuality'.

For some team members, links with their own faith, or with the faith of others, formed an important dimension of their involvement in the project. The head of one Church of England school found the principles of the project to be entirely in accord with her own Christian ethos and that of the school, and made a point of expressing this within the context of her own church, while a class teacher in another school saw the project's work as a demonstration of the inclusive tenets of Christianity. Others received outspoken support from Christian clergy on their Boards of Governors or from Christian parents. Overall, the project team's experience of mixed opposition and support from Christians reflected existing differences of opinion within the faith.

In contrast, the project was not successful in crossing religious and cultural boundaries where objections to LGBT equalities work were raised by Muslim groups. While the team derived significant benefits from consultation with a gay Muslim activist and a respected liberal Muslim scholar in seeking to resolve religious and cultural differences between some schools and members of their local communities, this was not sufficient to counter the complexities of different cultural interpretations of Islam in specific local contexts. These difficulties may also have been exacerbated by other associated areas of marginality within Muslim communities in England (related, for example, to class, ethnicity and gender). However, several Muslim

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members of school communities (including one parent governor) expressed their support for the democratic foundations of the project's work. In one case, while the Local Authority officially distanced itself from the *No Outsiders* project when it was experiencing strong opposition from the local Muslim community, countered by expressions of deep concern by local LGB residents at the potential withdrawal of project materials, negotiations with local community groups on how (rather than whether) to address LGBT equalities have continued beyond the scope of the project (Brace, in press; Givens & Nixon, 2008b) increasing the potential for greater mutual understanding between groups that had not previously engaged with each other.

8. How might the formation of a community of practice transform rather than reproduce existing practice?

We were concerned to investigate both the democracy of our own research community (DePalma & Atkinson, 2008b) and the transformational effects of creating a community of practice (DePalma, in press-a). While the notion of a community of practice has been criticised as favouring reproduction of existing practice rather than change, Wenger's model actually provides for both possibilities; and we found that while some aspects of the project's work served to perpetuate existing structures, others brought about significant changes in the ways in which teachers operated and thought within the school context. We aimed to promote internal negotiations in terms of the nature of our joint enterprise, the terms of mutual engagement and the nature of our shared repertoire rather than providing fixed understandings of these (DePalma, in press-a) and explored ways in which hegemonic effects of power differentials among project team members may subvert this negotiation process, as well as ways in which negotiation has been revived (DePalma & Teague, 2008). We found that the transformative potential of the project's work depended on maintaining relatively open borders with other practice communities, resulting in sometimes blurry boundaries across which new practices could be co-designed with neighbouring, longer-term communities such as activist groups and teaching communities (Brace, 2009).

9. How might queer theory inform classroom practice?

This question strongly informed much of our discussion and analysis (Atkinson & DePalma, 2008c; Cullen, 2009, in press; DePalma, 2008; Youdell, 2009). Not all project members

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considered a non-normative, or queer, classroom, in which identity categories are blurred or erased, to be a possible or even a desirable end, preferring to deploy a rights-based equalities discourse for which concrete identity categories were essential (DePalma & Atkinson, in press-a). While this difference in perspectives sometimes led to tensions, these were generally productive in terms of keeping dialogue alive over the overarching philosophy of the project. Some team members explored the possibility of creating non-normative learning environments through a process of questioning or troubling established norms of sexuality and gender. These practices tended to reside in the recognition of and response to critical incidents, which project members came to refer to as ‘*No Outsiders* moments’, rather than in planned interventions. It was also recognised that schools’ bureaucratic processes tend to run counter to non-normative practice, which may sometimes involve recognitions of subversions normally outside ‘schooled’ behaviour (Cullen, 2008; Cullen & Sandy, 2009; Cullen & Teague, 2008b) and that such practice is therefore more likely to be spontaneous and intuitive than deliberately planned (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009).

Activities

To date, project members have reported on the project in 42 separate academic conference/seminar presentations in Britain, Ireland, the US and Sweden (see Annex 2). Project members have also made 64 separate public/professional dissemination presentations, reaching a wide range of audiences (e.g. schools and Local Authorities, education unions; governors’ organisations; coordinators for Healthy Schools, PSHCE (Personal, Social, Health and Citizenship Education), SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning), SEN (Special Educational Needs), anti-bullying and emotional literacy; equalities organisations such as Stonewall, Schools Out, LGBT History Month and LGBT youth organisations; and policy groups such as the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority).

Outputs

To date, project team members have published 15 peer-reviewed journal articles/book chapters directly related to the project (see Annex 1) as well as producing an academic book entitled *Interrogating Heteronormativity in Primary Schools* (Trentham, June 2009) and a professional book entitled *Undoing Homophobia in Primary Schools* (Trentham, September 2009)

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(nominated outputs). Deborah Youdell has included a strong focus on project work in her book *Troubling Schools: identity, power and politics in education* (forthcoming, Routledge).

Dedicated symposia were presented at the British Educational Research Association (BERA) annual meetings of 2007 and 2008, and at a one-day seminar at the University of Exeter funded by an award from the Society for Educational studies as part of their *Education and the Body* seminar series in 2008.

The team has also produced a set of documentary films for dissemination and professional development. While these are not available for public distribution, they have already been widely used for information-sharing and training around the UK and at a number of academic conferences. Team-members will continue to use this resource for further events.

Impacts

Professional and Policy impact:

A particular strength of all professional dissemination has been its focus on professional development rather than simple information-sharing. Project members have participated widely in dissemination activities, and the uptake at Local Authority and Borough level shows that the project will continue to have an impact on the professional and local policy community long after the funded phase of the project has been completed. Team members have also been invited to discuss the project with equalities and anti-bullying advisors at the DCSF (Department for Children, Schools and Families), have attended a primary curriculum consultation with the QCA (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority) and have taken part in a TUC-led consultation on sexualities equality with Kevin Brennan MP, former parliamentary under-secretary at the DCSF. The project has also featured in professional studies lectures to student teachers at several universities.

The project has been selected for inclusion in The Global Human Rights Education Network (HREA) Compendium of good practices in human rights education and received the British Educational Research Association/Sage Publishers *Research into Practice* Award for schools and early years settings in September 2008.

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Public impact:

The project has been widely reported locally, nationally and internationally in print, broadcast and web-based media, and has stimulated a lively debate about sexualities equality in the public arena (see Appendix 4). In addition, the project website has been extensively used as an information hub.

Future Research Priorities

We recommend further research in the following areas:

1. Participatory action research following a design similar to that of this project but operating at the level of Initial Teacher Training provision, engaging providers in exploring how to support trainee primary teachers in exploring and challenging the sexuality and gender norms implicit in primary education settings.
2. Interview-based research exploring primary teachers' awareness and interpretation of LGBT-related equalities policy, its relevance to their schools and their practice, and their own responsibilities in relation to it.
3. Practice-based research drawing on insights from trans and gender-queer experience to deepen teachers' and children's understandings of gender and gender normativity, and add to the understanding of what trans equality might mean in relation to primary school settings.

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