

“That’s Gay!” – Think before you speak



Benjamin Butterworth speaks out against the callous use of the phrase ‘That’s gay!’ He argues that language reflects and forms attitudes, so should be carefully used. This article has been published collaboratively by *LSE Equality and Diversity* and *LSE Engenderings* blogs to mark LGBT History Month.

“That’s gay!”

This is the call heard in school playgrounds up and down the country. And up and down many other Western nations. Kids from New York to Newport will squeal with childhood innocence how ‘gay’ an error is; how because another kid got something wrong or didn’t know the answer to a question, they are now thoroughly ‘gay’. It is a word used with such propensity that it can hardly fathom definition by the end of a school day. Failing that test was gay. Your rubber is gay. That’s a gay pencil case. And your mum is DEFINITELY gay.

But these are not a newly enlightened generation of children eager to contemplate sexual and gender labeling in a post-liberal age. And I don’t think they are contemplating an emerging redefinition of the family to acknowledge that one’s mother could, in fact, be a homosexual. No. They are regular kids illustrating, in their own murky and trifled ways, much wider held attitudes within our society. Attitudes which do not propose to be nearly as tolerant or open-minded as we might want to think.

The problem of children using the term ‘gay’ as an insult is a big problem, but not a new problem. It has been well established in the past decade or so, and though laws and regulations around sexual orientation have changed a great deal in that time, small indicators like children’s language can give away considerable social undercurrents. Undercurrents which by their very nature do not surface in any fist-in-mouth, obtuse way, we can easily dismiss not to be problems at all.

The term in question was, of course, once an expression of merriment. I recall being on work placement in a Cheshire primary school during my GCSEs, and informing a child there that they were not to scream ‘gay!’ across the playground. The child replied with a gleeful twinkle that their use of the term ‘gay’ was not offensive, for it in fact means ‘happy’. The proud child may have thought they’d got one over on me, but what this really gave away was that the child knew, truthfully, what the term meant. And yet they made no effort to dispel using it. They felt it fully acceptable and ordinary playground language. And classroom language, for that matter.

The problem was that no adult had told them to stop using it. As a society we accept words like this being hurled around; either because we don’t want to cause a fuss, or because we don’t think it really matters. But the truth is that for many young people who are LGBT, the use of terms like ‘gay’ with such casual incessancy can come to cause serious insecurities. At a time in life when fitting in is a daily struggle, coming to terms with the fact you may be different – in such a fundamental, personal way – can be a real struggle. The last thing young people need is their difference being flaunted as a label for every misdemeanor.

What tolerating this abuse of language entrenches is a subtle acceptance that being different – being gay – is wrong. It becomes manifested in our casual language choices. Those who have never had to think much about sexual orientations use words like ‘gay’ or ‘faggot’, amongst a long list of profanities, without thought for what offence they can cause.



As adults, we need to take responsibility for the attitudes we espouse. It is crucial that teachers, schools and those in positions of responsibility (not least parents themselves) do not let these issues through the net. Schools need strong anti-bullying policies – which make explicit reference to dealing with sexual and gender orientation discrimination on all levels, in all circumstances. We are born homosexual, we learn homophobia.

As we mark LGBT History Month this February, we should recognise the great leaps forward which have been made along the path to equality. But with the same recognition, we must not mislead ourselves to think that the end goal has been achieved. Shaping our schools to be more tolerant and open minded is key to producing a generation without prejudice. So that, one day, the struggle for LGBT equality really will be a topic of *history*.

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February 21st, 2012 | [Society](#) | [1 Comment](#)

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