

Book Review

Book Title

Charlesworth, J. (2015). *That's So Gay: Challenging Homophobic Bullying*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, ISBN 978-1-84905

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With the number of homophobic prejudice based crimes (hate crimes) recorded by police in Britain increasing each year, Jonathan Charlesworth's book, *That's So Gay: Challenging Homophobic Bullying*, provides anyone involved in education or children's services with a practical, and thought provoking guide to challenge homophobic bullying. Charlesworth indicates that 'gay', as used in the context of the book, emerged as an acronym for 'Good As You' in the human rights movement of the 60's and 70's. He goes on to propose that homophobia will only end if society catches up with established legislation, through the normalisation of gay relationships. His work shows us how to educate pupils from a young age to understand the impact of their behaviour on individuals, but also in terms of rights, respect, equality and justice.

Charlesworth's work as Executive Director of Educational Action Challenging Homophobia (EACH), and his decades of experience in teaching, training and consultancy work with a vast range of local and national organisations including: Education, Ofsted, Police, Prison Services and the National Health Service, is evident in the depth and breadth of relevant information and guidance provided in this book.

Charlesworth's use of the atypical title, *That's So Gay*, creatively highlights how homophobic language is habitually used by children and young people today. The need to challenge this negative language that stereotypes gay as undesirable is the thread that runs through this work. The author proposes that homophobic bullying is not characterised by specific acts but by the negative

attitudes and beliefs that ground them. Throughout the book Charlesworth's strong use of a rights based approach to challenge homophobic bullying, targets its root causes, prejudice and discrimination. The comprehensive details describing what homophobic bullying is, and who experiences and perpetrates this distinct type of bullying, provide a clear understanding of homophobic bullying and to what extent it impacts on individuals and society. Moreover, Charlesworth's illustration of why implicit language depicting gay as inferior needs to be consistently challenged, even when it does not directly constitute homophobic bullying, may make you reflect on your value base and question your practice. Consequentially, this book provides examples of didactic responses and concise guidelines to help teachers and practitioners respond to verbal incidents in an age appropriate manner. Focusing on how children's values are formed at a very young age, regarding what is and what is not acceptable in reference to gender and sexual orientation, Charlesworth evidences the particular need for all primary schools to challenge pupils who use 'gay' in negative ways. Offering activities that help pupils of all ages to understand how their common language can attack people's characteristics and identity, this book may help you to explore, and challenge, children and young people's stereotypical images of gay people, and how these are influenced by media depictions.

By dedicating a chapter to Sensitive Handling of Disclosures, Charlesworth stresses the importance of practitioners being confident when supporting a young person who discloses their experience of homophobic bullying, or that they are gay. The guidance detailed in the book on the appropriate sharing of information and advice on handling disclosures should help practitioners to be sensitive to the context and needs of children and young people, especially if they are feeling isolated because they have been unable to tell their family or friends. Charlesworth hopes his practical guide will steer practitioners away from directly referring gay pupils to counselling, emphasising that this implies that gay people need therapy and treatment.

Charlesworth advocates a positive school ethos, with an anti-bullying policy as its foundation to be the essence that prevents homophobic bullying. However,

this book does not offer a copy and paste anti-bullying policy, but a range of straight forward activities and flow charts, which can be used to promote and evaluate the inclusive environment in your school. By promoting the co-production of a robust anti-bullying policy that specifically references homophobic bullying, the writer helps schools to realise opportunities to engage the whole school, including pupils and parents, in conversations, training and learning that encourages ownership of their anti-bullying policy and the establishment of an inclusive culture.

This book successfully achieves Charlesworth's aims to clarify what constitutes homophobic bullying and the production of a practical guide to challenge homophobic language and bullying. However, the occasional reference to American research and statistics and the inclusion of Scotland when referring to some legislation, appears incongruent to the books focus on English school policy.

Although this does not distract from the book's worth to schools and practitioners its relevance in Scotland may have been enriched if the author had also referenced Scottish policy. If an appendix detailing the list of activities in the book had been included, it may have further improved its practical use. Furthermore, the reference to EACH, of which the charity Jonathan Charlesworth is Executive Director, is made in the book over 40 times, and may be considered excessive by some or perceived as a marketing opportunity for the consultancy and training offered by the charity.

As a children's services worker located in schools, this book has painfully reminded me of the times I have not fully utilised the opportunities available when addressing homophobic bullying. It has made me question my practice and given me the practical skills to change and improve how I challenge oppression and promote equality for all pupils in relation to rights, not just gender prejudice. The book also reinforces how management, staff, pupils and families need to promote a consistent rights based approach to challenging prejudice based bullying, relating to the protected characteristics of the UK Equality Act 2010: race, religion, sexual orientation, transgender identity and disability. The

insights and learning exhibited by pupils participating in groups I have delivered, using activities detailed in the book, has motivated me to continue to use Charlesworth's other ideas further in learning and change programmes that I am developing.

Conclusively, this book is a recommended read for anyone involved in working in, or delivering education as well as children's services as it provides insightful and practical advice to effectively prevent and challenge homophobic bullying, particularly through the challenging of homophobic language. As Charlesworth suggests in his book 'if we change the way we speak we change the way we think'.

About the author

Linda Brewster (brewsterlj@gmail.com) is a children's services worker, she is employed by a local authority and works in both primary and secondary schools helping to protect vulnerable children and to support families in need. Her work empowers pupils and families to engage fully in education and learning, to give every child the opportunity to succeed. She has previously worked and managed children's services in both social work and education, including alternative educational provision, residential care, and Throughcare and Aftercare services. Having a MSc in Young People, Social Inclusion and Change her focus has always been about promoting equality and social justice, particularly for children, young people and families that are vulnerable and socially excluded.