

A need for enhanced focus

A needs assessment among students and teachers of three progressive schools in Italy, the Netherlands and Basque Country



The poster features the LeGoP logo on the left, which includes stylized figures in orange, blue, and purple above the text 'LeGoP' and 'LEARNING GOOD PRACTICES IN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES'. In the top right corner, there is a photograph of a group of people holding a banner that says 'ERASMUS+'. Below the logo, a list of participating organizations is provided, each accompanied by a small flag icon: Italy (LICEO SCIENTIFICO G.SALVEMINI BARI (CAPOFILA) and CONSORZIO ELPENDÙ MOLA DI BARI), Netherlands (GLOBAL ALLIANCE FOR LGBT EDUCATION AMSTERDAM), and Spain (GUREAK DONOSTIA and AXULAR LIZEQA SAN SEBASTIAN). The bottom of the poster shows a black silhouette of a city skyline against a light blue background.

LeGoP
LEARNING GOOD PRACTICES
IN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

- LICEO SCIENTIFICO G.SALVEMINI BARI (CAPOFILA)
-CONSORZIO ELPENDÙ MOLA DI BARI
- GLOBAL ALLIANCE FOR LGBT EDUCATION AMSTERDAM
- GUREAK DONOSTIA
-AXULAR LIZEQA SAN SEBASTIAN

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Summary

In 2015, three schools in Italy, Basque Country and the Netherlands carried out a needs assessment research among their students and teachers. The objective was to explore the attitude and behaviour towards sexual diversity and to generate directions and suggestions for exchange meeting of the joint "LeGoP" project and for a teacher e-course on combating homophobia.

The needs assessment showed that the three schools are rather progressive and an openness to deal with diversity. Still, the research show a need to act against homophobia. Even when individual students say they are not (so) homophobic, a large majority of them thinks that LGBT students cannot come out in their schools or is insecure about that.

Despite the willingness of teachers to engage against homophobia, the research results also showed a range of differences in assessment of the situation between students and teachers, and also between teachers in different countries and sometimes between teacher within school teams. These differences point to a need for teachers to discuss the focus of their efforts in this area and also to really listen to their students. Part of this discussion and "listening" can already start during the exchange meetings in this project by giving students a voice and teachers engaging in discussions about their priorities and team cooperation.

Introduction

Between 2014 and 2016, the European community funded a project called "LeGoP" ("Learning through Good Practices"). One of the goals of the LeGoP project was to develop an e-course for teachers so that they can be better equipped to teach about sexual diversity and also to have an ongoing care for a school environment in which teachers and students give and get respect, including the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students.

For this purpose exchanges were organized between three schools, Gaetano Salvemini in Bari (Italy), Axular Lizeo in Donostia/San Sebastian (Basque Country, Spain) and Hyperion Lyceum in Amsterdam (Netherlands) in 2015 and 2016.

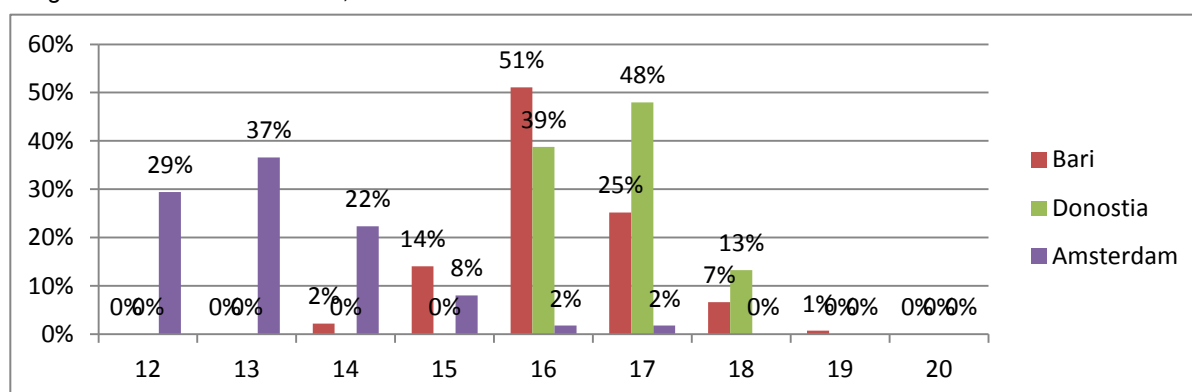
The LeGoP team carried out a survey among teachers and students of these schools. The survey had questions on social skills students need to learn, sex education, role modelling by teachers, homophobia and school policy.

In this analysis we focus on the main outcomes of a survey done among teachers and students of the three schools. The results serve to help develop the teacher e-course on homophobia, sexual education and a safer school climate and may also assist the schools to enhance their school policies.

The teacher and student samples

In total 63 teachers and 365 students took part in the survey. The Spanish and Italian students are approximately 15-18 years old, while the Dutch students are a lot younger (12-14 years old). This age difference can be of influence for the outcomes of this questionnaire.

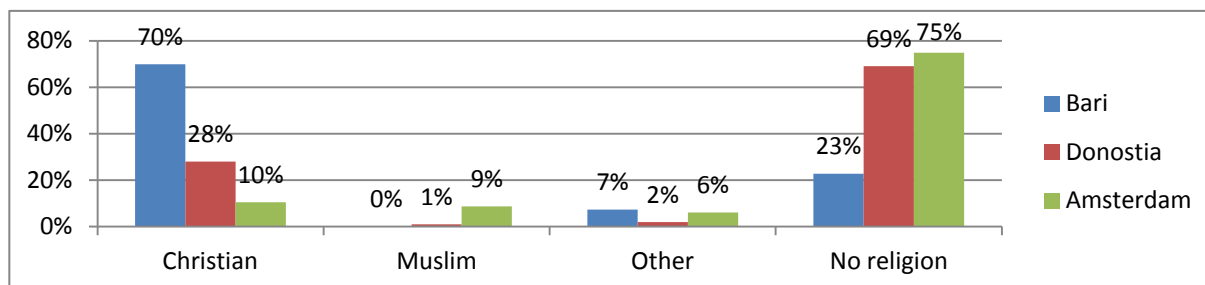
1. Age of the students from Bari, Donostia and Amsterdam



Most of the Italian teachers are Catholic, whereas only 10% of the Dutch are Christian and 28% of the teachers in Spain are Christian. The graph below shows the difference between the students. Most of the students from Donostia and Amsterdam are non-religious whereas most of the Italian students are Christians. This also may have an influence on the results; research on homophobia in schools shows a consistent difference between (more negative) attitudes of people who identify with religious communities as compared to non-religious people. It should be noted that this difference does not occur when comparing spiritually religious people to non-religious people. The negative effect appears to be related to

socially held opinions in conservative communities rather than to the spiritual aspect of religions.

2. Religion of the students from Bari, Donostia and Amsterdam



Needs to learn social skills

The teachers and students were both asked to fill in which social skills the students needed to learn. In a list of 10 key social skills, students score needs on *self-confidence*, *listening*, *respect*, *empathy*, and *dealing with differences*. The students scored highest on listening to each other and to teachers (27% in Bari and 22% in Donostia) and to give and to get respect (18% in Bari and 35% in Donostia), and to some extent on empathy and dealing with differences (10%). Due to a fault in the survey format, the students from Amsterdam were able to fill in one item "multiple answers" in the questionnaire. Most of the Dutch students answered the question about how to interact with each other with "multiple answers" (87%) and regrettably we cannot distinguish which specific skills score highest in this case. Teachers from all the three countries feel that it is important for the students to learn all social skills without exceptions.

One of the most important remarks teachers made in the comments section of the survey is that they felt *respect and acceptance* is important. This includes respect from the students for other students and for their teachers, but also the other way around; *students* also ask respect by teachers. Teachers also want the students to learn to accept differences among the students. However, students feel that the teachers are not role modelling such competences adequately. This is what the students say they are missing (especially teachers *listening to them* and *knowing how they feel*).

3. Answers of the students on how to interact with each other

How to interact with each other?

	Bari	Donostia	Amsterdam	Bari	Donostia	Amsterdam
Listen	27%	22%	0%	37	22	0
Empathize	6%	22%	3%	8	22	4
Differences	16%	11%	1%	22	11	1
Opinion	13%	1%	0%	18	1	0
not scold	1%	3%	0%	1	3	0
be polite	11%	2%	2%	15	2	2
work together	7%	2%	0%	9	2	0
Respect	18%	35%	3%	24	35	3
Multiple	1%	0%	87%	1	0	100
none of the above	1%	2%	4%	1	2	5
Total				136	100	115
non response			1%			5

Teacher role modelling social behaviour

Italian students feel that their teachers know when something is wrong, give their opinion with respect and are a good example/role model. The Spanish students feel that their teachers set clear rules, give a good example and give their opinion with respect to the opinion of others. But almost 1/3 of the Italian and the Spanish students scored highest on the option 'none of the above' which implies they feel their teachers are not good role models. The Dutch students scored highest on the option 'multiple', which may imply they feel more their teachers are good role models in all the aspect of social behaviour.

4. Answers of the students on the behaviour of their teachers

Behaviour teachers	Bari	Donostia	Amsterdam
Clear rules	7%	20%	3%

Good example	16%	18%	3%
Listen carefully	13%	7%	3%
Know when something is wrong	18%	8%	3%
Give opinion with respect	17%	15%	6%
none of the above	30%	32%	17%
Multiple	1%	0%	64%

Needs for sex education

The teachers disagree with each other on which subjects should be taught in sexual education. The students from Bari and Donostia scored highest on wanting to learn about *pregnancy, contraception, and sexually transmitted diseases* (Bari 41% and Donostia 22%). The students of the Netherlands scored highest on multiple options and on the single option *relationships*. They want to have more education about relationships, such as marriage, arranged marriage, divorce etc.

5. Answers of the students on what they want to learn during sexual education

Education about ... ?	Bari	Donostia	Amsterdam
Body/genitals	2%	11%	2%
Reproduction	7%	17%	0%
Relationships	15%	15%	14%
Sexual diseases	41%	22%	6%
Religion and sexuality	11%	7%	3%
None of the above	24%	28%	33%
Multiple	1%	0%	42%

It is noteworthy that a majority of the Italian teachers think there is no need to discuss sex among the students in the school, but teachers in the Netherlands and Spain do.

The comments also show that all teachers agree on the need to promote self-confidence in sex and relationships, but also self-confidence and self-respect in general. Italian and Spanish students agree with their teachers, but Dutch students find this much less important.

6. Answers of the students on the question: Do you need to learn how to be more secure about yourself and how to tell others what you do or do not want?

13. ... to be more secure (N)

Certainly	Bari	Donostia	Amsterdam
Yes	79%	77%	37%
Maybe, maybe not	11%	15%	34%
No	10%	8%	29%

Impressions of the levels of homophobia in the schools

Spanish teachers think their students are quite homophobic, Italian teachers think a bit less their students are homophobic and Dutch teachers think their students are hardly homophobic. The students disagree with their teachers. For example, students from Donostia score highest on wanting to be being friends with a gay or lesbian fellow student (92%), followed by the students from Bari (77%) and from Amsterdam Netherlands (61%).

However, students are more negative about non-traditional gender behaviour. Students in Italy are more bothered by non-traditional gender behaviour than Spanish or Dutch students. But teachers may feel insecure about this too. Half of the Spanish teachers would also feel bothered by girlish behaviour of gay boys or boyish behaviour of lesbian girls.

Possibility to come out in school

The graph below shows that 80% of the girls feel only attracted to boys and 90% of the boys feel only attracted to girls. This means that 20% of the girls and 10% of the boys filled in one of the other answers and is possibly a LGBT student.

7. Answers of the students on the question: To whom do you feel attracted?

Attracted to...	boys	girls	boys	girls
Only boys	3%	80%	6	119
Mostly boys	0%	9%	0	13
Both	2%	1%	4	1
Mostly girls	4%	1%	8	1
Only girls	90%	2%	183	3
I do not know	1%	5%	2	8
I do not want to tell you	0%	2%	1	3
Total			204	148
non response		1%		4

The graph below shows the possibility to come out in your school. Most of the students from Bari (51%) feel that a LGBT student in their school would not come out and 41% of the students do not know if the LGBT student would come out. In both Donostia (41%) and Amsterdam (57%) also a large number of the students do not know if an LGBT student would come out and a smaller but still significant number of 34% (Donostia) and 27% (Amsterdam) think a LGBT student cannot come out at their school. This insecurity clearly points to the need to make the school climate in all three schools safer.

8. Answers of the students on the question: If you were a LGBT student, would you come out?

Would you come out?	Bari	Donostia	Amsterdam
Yes	7%	25%	16%
Maybe, maybe not	41%	41%	57%
No	51%	34%	27%

In Italy and Spain teachers express a need for *setting rules* and *offering information through sex-education* to solve this problem. In Amsterdam neither the teachers nor the students think they need more rules. The Dutch students feel that *reprimanding students* would help to make to school a safer place and again scored highest on multiple answers.

Preferred social policy and non-discrimination policy

The Italian and Spanish teachers prefer to adopt stronger school rules against homophobic bullying. The Dutch teachers doubt if this will create a safer environment. This difference may reflect cultural differences between the more hierarchical relationship between teachers and students in the South of Europe as compared with the Netherlands.

The Spanish teachers plead for more education about homophobia. In some countries, students create a Gay/Straight Alliance (GSA) student club in school to support LGBT students and to advocate the school to improve policy. The Spanish teacher team disagrees internally on this, some are for and some are against the idea of a GSA. In the Italian and Dutch teacher teams there are majorities who think a GSA may be helpful.

Students in Italy and Spain have different ideas about LGBT school safety policy, in the Netherlands they agree a mix of interventions will be best.

The Dutch students think gay and lesbian students need more support, while their teachers think this is not so necessary. A majority of the Italian and Spanish teachers think such support is necessary.

Differences among the teachers

Teachers, particularly in Spain and Italy, show a lot of interest to learn about LGBT issues and how they can address this in classes and their school. Most of the teachers from Bari and Donostia feel that the school should help LGBT students.

9. Answers of the teachers on the question if they think the school should help LGBT students.

55. Help LGBT students

Certainly	Bari	Donostia	Amsterdam
Yes	90%	68%	36%
Maybe, maybe not	10%	11%	64%
No	0%	21%	0%

In all three countries the teachers agree there should be more education about sexuality and sexual diversity.

10. Answers of the teachers on the question if they think there needs to be more education about sexuality and sexual diversity

53. More education (BB)

Certainly	Bari	Donostia	Amsterdam
Yes	67%	100%	64%
Maybe, maybe not	29%	0%	36%
No	5%	0%	0%

However, the remarks made in the survey show that teachers differ in their focus. Some feel they need to *acquire more knowledge* about the concepts around sexual diversity, others want to *know how to support LGBT students* and again others want to know *how to create an environment in which every student can meet respect and acceptance*. Implementation of a joint school policy needs focus and commitment.

Conclusions

This research was done as a needs assessment for an e-course about sexual diversity for teachers in Italy, Basque Country/Spain and the Netherlands. The results give the impression of three rather progressive schools where the openness towards sexual diversity is relatively high.

However, there are also worrying tendencies.

The main worrisome result is that more than half of the students is insecure or negative about a LGBT student coming out to be gay, bisexual, lesbian or transgender at school. Although students seem to be quite tolerant or even friendly towards fellow LGBT students, this personal opinion does not translate to a supportive social environment. This finding is not unique, on the contrary. It is common that homophobia and transphobia can exist as a social phenomenon while a majority of the students express individual positive opinions. This

means that negative (homophobic) signals still get too much attention and are not challenged enough, which results in LGBT students being intimidated in staying silent about their personality.

Like the students, teachers seem to be quite open to diversity and willing to improve the school environment. However, their assessment of skills that students need and their behaviour (as perceived by students) does not seem to be completely adequate. For example, students want to learn more *self-confidence, listening, respect, empathy, and dealing with differences*. Teachers express mainly that for students, *respect and acceptance* is important. Students also ask respect by their teachers. The students say they are sometimes missing teachers *listening to them* and *knowing how they feel*. Apparently, they feel teachers are not role modelling respect dealing with diversity enough.

The results also show that teachers sometimes have a quite different impression of their students than the students have of themselves. For example, the Basque teachers think their students are quite homophobic while the students say they are not, while the Dutch teachers think their students are very LGBT friendly, but this is not reflected to that extent in the responses of their students.

Another issue is that teachers do not always agree with each other on what needs to be done to improve the school situation. Some feel the priority should be teacher training (especially improving knowledge levels), others think student counselling is important and others again think a whole-school approach (policy) would be more effective. This result also is not unique for this research. In many schools, teachers work rather autonomously and their focus is often on transfer of knowledge or training specific technical skills. Teamwork on creating a socially supportive environment is complicated in such a system and is often perceived to cost precious time and of secondary importance. Even when the willingness is there to work on social inclusion, the everyday routine of schools may be in the way of a joint effort on this.

Recommendations

In this chapter we focus on the original goal of this needs assessment (the e-course) but also on possible follow-up in the project in the schools.

Recommendations for the e-course

The teachers expressed a need for more knowledge about sexual diversity. This aspect was already integrated in the draft plan for the course, which shows this is a good choice.

There are differences in opinion about needed school policies. These may reflect differences in North-South cultures and particular school cultures, but they also reflect a lack of common insight about what scientific evidence there is about how to create safer schools. This points to the need to give some attention to the question of school change in the e-course.

Both students and teachers want more attention for how to learn more *self-confidence, listening, respect, empathy, and dealing with differences*. We recommend that the e-course does not only deal with enhancing knowledge but also on how to develop such skills in schools.

Recommendations for the project

The differences in opinion between teachers and students are an interesting starting point for discussion, and the exchanges between teachers and students during the LeGoP project can serve to help teachers "hear" the students better. It is therefore recommended to create opportunities for the students to form and present their opinions on homophobia during the exchanges. It would be useful if such opinions serve as discussion topics in the teacher teams of the involved schools.

The project focuses not only on homophobia but also on dealing with diversity in connection with special needs students. Solutions for special needs students often focus on technical assistance, while combating homophobia and discriminations tends to focus on social skills and underlying attitudes. The project could explore the common issues between these diversities and make connections to enhance whole-school diversity policy.

Recommendations for school policy

The differences among teachers themselves, even within one school, points to the need for more discussion about joint policies. In a school where most teachers act on their own accord, students may get the impression that commitment to sexuality and diversity policy and the way it is approached is a matter of personal preference of teachers.

Therefore it is recommended teachers have some team meetings to discuss their opinions about how to approach sexual education and sexual diversity policy. The objective of such meetings should be to develop a common perspective and set joint goals to get a focussed improvement plan. Although all teachers have a personal and professional autonomy, the school environment is best served by agreeing on a joint plan that gives direction on one hand and leaves freedom for authentic implementation by each teacher. This is the challenge for each of the three schools involved in this research.

Colophon:

Dankmeijer, Peter; Van Tuijl, Myrthe; Vezzelli, Valentina; Potalivo, Elisa; Schouten, Marinus (2015), *A need for enhanced focus. A needs assessment among students and teachers of three progressive schools in Italy, the Netherlands and Basque Country*. Amsterdam: GALE