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'Um, I was getting bullied at school because I didn't believe in God': one family's experience of autism, school and home education

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‘Um, I was getting bullied at School because I didn’t believe in God’: One Family’s experience of Autism, School and Home Education.

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Christine Bower is an experienced learning support teacher with a history of working in primary, secondary and special school settings over the past ten years. Throughout these ten years Christine has continued to develop her knowledge and understandings of specific learning difficulties by taking part in in-service training provided by the Education Authority and by completing a Master’s in inclusion and special educational needs. Christine has been heavily involved in influencing government policy through her role as an elected representative and a Communications, Policy and Research Manager for a Governmental Minister of the Department of Employment and Learning (Northern Ireland). These roles allowed Christine to influence educational policy makers on the importance of inclusive practice and equal educational opportunities for all children and young people regardless of their ability. Christine’s views about disability are informed by her belief in inclusion, equality and social justice for all regardless of differences.

She is currently in the second year of a PhD, through Queen's University Belfast and is focusing on inclusive education for young people with a learning disability and autistic young people. She is particularly interested in educational philosophy, inclusive practice, education, neurodiversity, learning disability, autism and special educational needs.

‘Um, I was getting bullied at School because I didn’t believe in God’: One Family’s experience of Autism, School and Home Education.

Home education is one of several educational options for children in Northern Ireland. Many parents decide to home educate before their child reaches school age whereas others decide following a period of enrolment within a school. In these latter cases, parents often do so because they believe that their child’s emotional, social and/or educational needs were not being met by school. Research has shown that children with special educational needs, particularly those with autism, are more at risk of not having their needs met in a classroom environment than their peers resulting in a higher proportion of these children being removed and home educated. This paper presents in-depth case study of one home educating family who experienced a similar scenario. The data presented is in a series of vignettes which explores their journey to home education. Their journey involved a negative school experience because of bullying and understandings of autism, sexuality and religion. The findings highlight the need for schools to become more inclusive of all children, and families, despite differences in educational needs, sexuality and religious views through additional training, awareness, and policies that are reflective of a changing society. These recommendations would help to improve the school experience for those who diverge from society’s perceptions of what is typical.

Keywords: autism, inclusive practice, home education, bullying, sexuality, religion

Introduction

Education for all children living in the United Kingdom (UK) is compulsory by law. However, their education does not have to take place in a school institution and parents may decide to home educate (Smith and Nelson 2015; Arora 2003; Meighan 1995). The Education Act (1996) and the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order (1986) clearly state that

the responsibility to ensure that children receive a suitable and efficient education lies with the parent of each child aged 4-16 years.

Most children in Northern Ireland (NI) who are enrolled in a school, whether they identify as Christian or not, are educated from a Christian perspective. This is because NI continues to be a society that bases its moral compass and political decisions on conservative Christian values (Evans and Tonge 2018). Although society is beginning to change, conservative Christian values mean that NI, unlike the rest of the UK, does not recognise same sex marriage. This issue was brought to the NI Assembly five times between 2012 and 2015, and although the last vote secured a majority in favour of same sex marriage, NI's largest political party, the Democratic Unionist Party, vetoed the result by using a petition of concern (Rainbow Project NI 2018). Despite this apparent shift in NI societal values, many schools continue to educate children from a conservative Christian perspective, partially because schools are managed by a Board of Governors that is composed of church clergy and political representatives (NI Direct 2018). There are, therefore, limited formal schooling options for parents who do not wish their child to have a Protestant or Catholic education.

I will focus on an in-depth case study of one same-sex family's journey from school to home education for their autistic son when, on their account, his school failed to meet his educational, emotional and social needs. The school failed to adequately deal with claims of bullying, provide school work at the appropriate level, recognise his family as equal to others, or to support him in developing friendships.

The argument will be presented as follows. **First, I will provide some context to the NI school system and the influence of school-based education and bullying on children's learning and development. This will be followed by a summary of the difficulties faced by autistic children within schools.** I will then provide an overview of home education within NI

and the UK discussing the numbers of parents who have made the decision to home educate their child and their motivations for doing so. I will then discuss the methodology and research design of the study. Next, I present the data on the challenges that were experienced by the family and their son because of his autism, his religious beliefs and his parents' sexuality: a contentious issue in NI. The data will be discussed against the wider literature on the inclusion of autistic people in education, bullying and the place of religion in schools. Finally, I will offer some recommendations to improve autistic and atheist young people's experience of school in NI.

Education in Northern Ireland

The Northern Ireland (NI) education system prides itself on offering parental choice through a variety of different state funded school types and other educational options. Parents of children with no special educational needs (SEN) or mild to moderate SEN can choose from five different funded school types: Controlled Schools, Catholic Maintained Schools, Voluntary Grammar Schools, Integrated Schools and Irish Medium Schools. For children diagnosed as having a moderate, severe or profound learning disability there is a further option of a Special School. If none of these six types of school is a suitable option parents have two further options - to send their child to an Independent School, the majority of which are provided by churches that receive no state funding; or to opt for Education Other than at School (EOTAS) (DfE, year) which includes Elective Home Education and Alternative Education Provision (AEP).

Whilst there may appear to be many options for education in NI parents are given the choice of only two definitions of Christianity. This is because all state funded schools, with the exception of Irish Medium and Special Schools, are designated, by their alignment to

local churches and the profile of the Board of Governors, as Catholic (Catholic Maintained), Protestant (Controlled Schools and Voluntary Grammar) or, less commonly, a mixture of both variations of Christianity (Integrated Schools). As there is no official information sent to parents prior to making their child's school application, the onus is on parents to find out about the different school options. Parents can personally obtain this information online (see www.nidirect.gov.uk and www.eani.org.uk), or by visiting schools in their area. Despite the influence of Christianity in state funded schools, most parents continue to send their children to either Catholic or Protestant schools. However, although still a minority, it appears that more parents are choosing to take on the responsibility of educating their own children outside of a school setting with a year on year increase in recorded numbers of children being home educated (BBC 2018). Reports also suggest that there appears to be a high proportion of children noted as having a special educational need (SEN) (BBC 2018).

Special Educational Needs

Previous research has shown a similar pattern of high numbers of children with SEN being home educated (Hopwood et al. 2007). Hopwood et al.'s (2007) study to determine the numbers of children who were home educated, motivations to home educate and the teaching methods used, discovered that 5% of the home educated children in their sample had a Statement of SEN in contrast to 2.9% of the entire school aged population. Hopwood et al (2007) suggest that this figure underestimates the occurrence of SEN or disability in home educated children as many never attended a school or did not attend a school long enough to receive a diagnosis.

When parents are asked why they chose to home educate, the answer is not always because they wholeheartedly disagreed with school education, though this is the case for some families; rather, they perceived that school-based education resulted in specific barriers

to learning or inclusion for their children. These barriers frequently included reasons such as: their child being bullied (D'Arcy 2014); gifted or bright children not having their extra needs met (Arai 2000); SEN and/or disabilities that required the school to provide specific support but who did not receive it (Arora 2006); educational programmes not preparing children for the future (Hurlbutt 2011); medical problems that required special care and observation of the child (McDonald and Lopes 2014); and, teachers who were unprepared and lacked the appropriate SEN training (Hurlbutt, 2011).

Some studies suggest that school bullying disproportionately affects autistic children (Humphrey and Hebron 2015; Garner and Hinton 2010). Autism is recognised as a complex and lifelong condition characterised by a triad of differences in socialisation, communication and behaviour (American Psychiatric Association 2013). Beyond the triad of differences used to diagnose autism, autistic individuals may also experience cognitive differences such as sensory processing, difficulty in understanding others thoughts and emotions, poorer executive functioning and motor skills, and weaker central coherence (AAETC 2008). These differences also include strengths such as, intense interests, rote memory, visual spatial abilities, compartmentalised learning and logical thinking (AAETC 2008). The numbers of people diagnosed as autistic has been increasing with recent estimates suggesting that one person out of every 59 is autistic (Ferguson et al. 2018). Despite these increases, there continues to be a lack of understanding about the unique educational needs of autistic people (McDonald and Lopes 2014). This is in part because of the lack of SEN training teachers receive in both their initial teacher education and in-service training, and because of a lack of resources to support children with SEN (Purdy and Mc Guckin 2014). All schools follow the same SEN framework which provides a legal basis that ensures that schools make reasonable adjustments to include children with SEN (DENI 1998). To ensure adjustments are made all schools have access to a SEN resource file that provides teachers with guidance on how to

include all children within their classrooms and lessons (DENI 2011). However, the guide fails to address all situations and ignores important issues such as bullying or how to socially include children.

Schools are obliged to keep parents informed about the adaptations being made for their children. However, they are often not well informed about services and support. One consequence of this has been the emergence of SEN charities which have the aim of securing appropriate SEN adaptations through advising and advocating on behalf of parents. Despite charitable support, it is widely perceived that teachers lack understanding of and skills in SEN. This means that more parents are becoming disillusioned with the ability of school to provide a suitable education for their child (Hurlbutt 2011). When this happens, parents have two options: an application to change to a different school (though this option is not always available, particularly for people in rural areas with limited schools); or to home educate.

Some of the motivations behind parental decisions to home educate their autistic child have been attributed to their concerns about the difficulties faced by autistic students in mainstream school settings, including: a lack of individualised attention and support; increased anxiety; sensory difficulties; social isolation; and a disproportionate degree of bullying experienced by children with autism (Humphrey and Symes 2010; McDonald and Lopes 2014). Research suggests that although parents believe their child's school wants to promote the inclusion of all children, individual teachers are inadequately prepared to meet the additional educational needs of autism (Hurlbutt 2011). Often, parents who chose school for their child then later decided to home educate have done so as they believed that it was their only option (Jones 2013). Their decision may come after a long conflict between parents' ideals of how their child should be experiencing inclusion versus the schools' own ideals about inclusion and their ability to provide this (Ainscow, Booth and Dyson 2006).

School and Bullying

A positive and inclusive school environment can be influenced by many factors, one of which is policies that provide a framework for the roles and responsibilities of staff and pupils. Some school policies, including SEN and anti-bullying policies, are a requirement by law. Although all schools in NI have an anti-bullying policy, school bullying is a continuing problem that has been receiving increased attention because of the long-lasting, negative impact it can have on a person's life. However, there is no legal definition of what constitutes bullying in NI, and schools themselves can determine their own understanding and definition of it (Purdy and Smith 2016), therefore, the understanding and treatment of bullying is not consistent across schools.

Researchers broadly agree that bullying is a form of repeated, aggressive behaviour which is intended to cause distress or harm to another person who is perceived as being unable to defend herself or himself (Purdy and Smith 2016; Collins et al. 2004). A major feature of the dynamic of bullying is the power imbalance between the person being bullied and the bully. Often bullies are socially, psychologically or physically more powerful, and the bullying behaviour is motivated by numerous factors that include: establishing their dominance or status; to conform to the norms of the community; pressure to bully from their peers; as an act of revenge; to punish deviants or non-conforming individuals; or, as an emotional release (Wong et al. 2013; Thornberg 2010). Bullying itself can manifest in many ways including: physical and verbal bullying; gesture bullying; extortion bullying; exclusion bullying; and cyber bullying (Collins et al. 2004). Being subjected to bullying has been associated with poorer mental and physical health with victims experiencing a myriad of negative outcomes ranging from stomach aches to low self-esteem and high risk of suicide (Collins et al. 2004). The pupils who are more likely to be bullied are those who display differences such as physical differences in appearance, height or weight; a physical or

learning disability; speech and language difficulties; sexual orientation; social and emotional differences; displays of behaviour that are considered odd; and, being autistic (Wong et al. 2013).

Methods

Research aims and questions

The data presented in this paper was taken from a larger mixed methods study that explored the motivations and experiences of families who were home educating in NI. The study collected two types of data independently within a short period of time: online self-completion parent questionnaires (regarding n=42 children) and semi-structured family interviews (n=5). The data generated from the questionnaires will not be used in this paper but will rely solely on the data generated in one, in-depth family interview.

Semi-structured family interviews were chosen to allow every family member involved in home education to have their experiences and views heard. The interviews were conducted within the family's own homes to ensure the least disruption to the family's day and to make sure all participants, in particular the children, were in a comfortable interview setting (Bushin 2007). Each interview was recorded on an iPad and transcribed. Participants were sent the transcription to check for accuracy (Cresswell 2014). Following this all names and locations were changed to a pseudonym.

Recruitment and Sample

Generic purposive sampling was used to select families for interviews (Bryman 2016). Parents who completed the questionnaire were invited to add their details if they were

willing to be interviewed. The criteria for inclusion to participate in the research were that participants needed to be home educating a school aged child in NI.

Here, I will focus on one family made up of two mothers, Nadine and Rachael, and one of their two sons, Toby (autistic and eight years' old). Toby attended a small state funded Protestant school until he was seven when he was removed after numerous struggles with the school.

Rationale for focusing on one Family

Although several parents had indicated in the questionnaire that their child had a SEN only this family was willing to talk about this in the interview. Three out of the five family interviews had children who had been identified by their parents as having SEN, yet none of these children knew of their diagnosis. The parents seemed fearful about making their child feel different because of their SEN and this inhibited two of the families from talking openly about this in front of their child. Rachael, Toby's mother, was only willing to discuss her sons' difficulties if we agreed not discuss his autism when he was in the room.

Ethics

Full ethical consent was obtained through Queen's University Belfast School of Education Ethics committee before the recruitment of participants.

Data analysis

The interview transcript presented in this article, through a series of vignettes, was analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is the technique of identifying, analysing and reporting themes found within a data set (Braun and Clarke 2008).

Findings

To enhance confidentiality, the findings of this research will be presented through a series of vignettes. These vignettes were constructed by summarising the data into short, literary sketches based on the themes found within the data (Jacobsen 2014). In using vignettes I wanted to provide a window into the family's experience, how they managed their experience and how they understand and conceptualise what happened to Toby in school.

Initial motivations to Home Educate: Bullying because of Religious Beliefs

Toby believed that the main reason he was being educated at home was because he was being bullied by both his peers and teachers because he was an atheist. Although Toby was not a Christian, and did not wish to practice the religion, he continued to attend the school assemblies. His mothers had previously told him he did not have to join in with worship but that he did have to be quiet and respectful. When Toby tried to respectfully opt out of the collective prayer in a Remembrance service by sitting with his eyes open, he was pointed out by a peer to a teacher who then shamed him in front of the whole school by accusing him of being disrespectful to God, Queen, country and the troops. Toby felt he had suffered an injustice at the hands of the teacher as he knew that his peer, Elizabeth, could not have been praying if she had noticed that he was not praying. At the time the incident occurred Toby did not want to tell his mother about how much he was suffering from

numerous incidents of school bullying. However, his mothers gradually became aware of some of the school bullying their son was experiencing.

Bullying because of his Parents' Sexuality

When Toby's parents, Rachael and Nadine, became aware of the peer bullying they made a visit to the school to make the principal aware of the issue and to request some help and support for their son. The principal was unwilling to intervene as she felt that the cause of the bullying had nothing to do with school or his peers but with Toby's beliefs and family situation. The advice the mothers were given was that if Toby did not want to be bullied he should not be so open about his mother's sexuality and his atheist beliefs. Nadine and Rachael felt that the principal was discriminating against them and their son because of their sexuality. Nadine and Rachael already felt marginalised in NI society because of the strong views about same-sex relationships which hindered their ability to help their son. As the school took no responsibility for the bullying, the principal did not follow the school's anti-bullying policy and Toby received no additional support or protection.

School not responding to Child's Needs or Parental concerns

Alongside Toby's parents' concerns about bullying were their fears that Toby's educational needs were not being met by the school. Toby was academically more advanced than his peers in numeracy and literacy. However, like other autistic people, he struggled with socialising and imagining (American Psychiatric Association 2013). In his first year in primary school the class teacher was prepared to make reasonable amendments to provide suitable work at his level. This meant that Toby was completing numeracy and literacy tasks that were a year ahead of the work his peers were completing. In the following academic

year, Toby's new teacher knew that his reading ability was high so she set him up with a reading buddy who was an older pupil at the school. However, this arrangement did not continue after their first meeting. Within class, Toby's school used ability grouping to group children of similar ability together to allow the teacher to differentiate work for each group rather than each child. This meant that, although Toby could work at a higher level, he was restricted to the learning material provided to his group. On one occasion, Toby's teacher was focused on teaching phonics to his group, focusing on individual letter sounds and asking the children to sound these out slowly. Toby was quite frustrated at this as he knew how to sound out and blend the letter sounds to read the word. When he demonstrated his ability, the teacher accused him of being disruptive to other children's learning.

Toby was frequently accused of being disruptive because he did not follow the social rules of the ability group in which he was placed. Instead of waiting for his turn to answer the teacher's questions he would shout out the correct answers, resulting in him being disciplined by the teacher. Toby did not understand why he was being disciplined when he knew he was answering their questions correctly. The teachers failed to recognise that Toby's underdeveloped social awareness meant that he was not able to grasp the dynamics of the group work and was answering their questions not to be disruptive, but because he thought that was the behaviour that was expected of him.

Recognising that Toby was being bullied and not receiving an adequate education, Nadine and Rachael made frequent visits to the school. His parents were informed that the school had assessed Toby, had found his ability to be higher than the work he was being set, yet the school had no plans to provide Toby with work at the right level. His parents believed that this was because the school had no legal requirement to make specific amendments for Toby. On one of Nadine's visits to the school, the principal implied that Toby's parents' ideas of an appropriate education for Toby were different to that of the school, commenting

that she thought his parents would be visiting the school often to complain. Toby's parents realised that the school had no intentions of supporting their son in his education or protecting him against bullying.

Social Exclusion

Rachael and Nadine felt that the bullying Toby was experiencing was partly due to his inability to make friends and the differences in his beliefs and family situation. Toby had had no connection to anyone in the community prior to starting school because his family had moved from another country just before he started school. Toby needed support from the adults to navigate the world of friendships. The school made virtually no attempt to include him in social activities and any attempts to do so failed to remove barriers to form friendships and be included in games. As Toby was not included in playground games and could not make friends without the support of adults, the school facilitated his social exclusion. Toby felt that none of his peers liked him and that he had a positive relationship with only two adults in the school who tried to treat him nicely: a classroom assistant and a PE teacher.

Home Education as the answer

Following a long struggle by Toby's parents to get the school to support their son in all areas of his education, including bullying and socialisation, they decided that the school was incapable of providing Toby with an efficient and suitable education. They also felt that the negative experience Toby had been through in school had impacted on his mental health so badly that they could not send him to a different school, and that he needed some time to come to terms with how he was treated. Following his removal from the primary school Toby struggled to talk about school without becoming upset. A few months after his home

education had started Toby was taken by his parents to a presentation in a science museum. When the family arrived in the room Toby hid under a table because it brought back memories of his time in school and was unable to stay for the presentation.

Nadine and Rachael concluded that home education was their only option because it could be tailored to Toby's unique and individual needs. It allowed his parents to focus on the areas he found difficult, such as socialisation, and less on the areas he found easy, such as numeracy and literacy. Rachael felt that this highly individualised approach to his education would not be achievable in a school situation.

Discussion

School Bullying and Social Exclusion

Similar to previous research where bullying is a motivating factor to home educate (D'Arcy 2014; McDonald and Lopes 2014), this research has shown that Toby's experience of bullying and social exclusion contributed to his negative experience at school and ultimately led to him being home educated. As a boy who appears to his peers to have numerous differences including, autism, same sex parents and not being part of the wider community prior to starting school, his profile aligns to the typical victim profiles found in previous literature. Typical victim profiles suggest that people who are more susceptible to bullying are likely to be those who have difficulties in social understanding (Garner and Hinton 2010), are perceived by others as being 'different' or as deviating from peer groups (Humphrey and Hebron 2015), and have low social status (Card and Hodges 2007). Research also shows that bullying is an issue that disproportionately affects children with autism because of the social aspect of the condition (Humphrey and Hebron 2015). The vignette's clearly show that because of Toby's autism he experienced bullying through his non-

inclusion in playground games. Further, his belonging to a non-traditional family challenged the religious beliefs held by teachers and peers within the school which led to his punishment for not joining in with prayer time. Furthermore, Toby's lack of understanding about group work and when to answer questions appeared to threaten teacher's control of the classroom which led to verbal bullying by the teacher.

Unfortunately, for Toby, even when the bullying was identified by his parents, the bullying behaviours were not resolved within school. They felt they had to remove him as the teachers not only would not help him but seemed to be contributing to the problem. Instead of supporting Toby, the teacher's bullying behaviour set an example to his peers on how he should be treated by others. Of the little research available, it suggests that class teachers have the most influence in resolving bullying situations for autistic children (Purdy and McGuckin 2014). This is because teachers are in a position of influence and can present explanatory information to the child's peers about autism which can help to remove any confusion or fears about behaviours. However, teachers are not trained in how to best deal with bullying that is influenced by disability (Purdy and McGuckin 2014). Further, because anti-bullying policies are not consistent in their definitions of bullying, teachers may lack an overall understanding of what constitutes bullying, particularly disablist bullying, and how to deal with it. Furthermore, the resources available to teachers to support SEN, such as the SEN resource file, do not include specific guidance relating to incidents of bullying (DENI 2011).

Religion in School

All schools are tasked with producing and reproducing knowledge. Some of this knowledge is contained within the curriculum and the rest comes from the knowledge that is brought by school staff and pupils, such as religion, their community's values, beliefs and social norms and is 'communicated to pupils in the ways that teachers decide to construct and

reconstruct in the curriculum' (Donnelly 2004, p5). The school ethos contains the values, beliefs and norms that are separate to the curriculum, yet are fully revealed to the pupils through the actions and attitudes of the staff. Research has continued to show that the influence of teachers on the ethos of their classrooms defines the behaviour that is acceptable, or not, within their classrooms and among the pupils they teach. In Toby's case, it appeared that not complying to Christian practices or being part of a family with one mother and father was unacceptable, permitting other pupils to be involved in the discipline of Toby by their informing the teacher.

Bullying because of religious belief in NI has been widely reported in literature but generally the focus is on sectarian bullying rather than bullying because of no religious conviction (Hayes et al. 2013). Sectarian behaviour has been prevalent in NI for many years because of societal segregation based on which Christian community, Catholic or Protestant, a pupil belongs (Hayes et al. 2013). This has been the cause of much division throughout the country and contributes to bullying amongst both children and adults within schools, communities and workplaces (Collins et al. 2004). Toby's case does not align with sectarian bullying, rather it was because his belief did not align with either Catholic or Protestant doctrine.

The teacher's own values and beliefs are not the only influences on the classroom or school ethos. In general, the school system in NI continues to be heavily influenced by Christian teaching and values, so much so that some authors are inclined to describe all schools in NI as 'faith schools' (Richardson 2008). Although this assumption is not true of all schools, Toby was a pupil of a school with a strong Protestant Christian ethos. The combination of religious ethos and practice, the lack of understanding of Toby's autism, and family composition, all led to his experience of bullying.

Further, recent research has demonstrated a correlation between autism and atheism (Bering 2002). This research suggests, autistic people were more likely than their non-autistic peers to have no religious belief. Although Toby did not disclose why he did not have a faith, his experience has highlighted an important consideration that schools need to be aware of: that some pupils may not be able to comply with, or join in, faith-based activities as it has no purpose or meaning for them. Attending a school steeped in faith-based values, thinking and activities may result in atheist and autistic people's exclusion from certain areas of the curriculum or friendship groups.

Conclusion

This research adds to a small body of worldwide research on home education and autism. This research has highlighted some of the unique challenges faced by an autistic child in a primary school with conservative, Protestant Christian views. Toby's home education provision provided him with an inclusive and accepting educational environment in which he thrives. The wisdom of his parents' choice to home educate was confirmed when they saw the positive changes in their son as a result of having his educational and emotional needs met. Although the numbers of children being home educated are increasing, some parents continue to be unaware of the option to home educate. Therefore, when a child reaches school-age, parents should be fully informed by the Department of Education NI about all educational options prior to applying to a school. This would allow a fully informed parent to make the best choice for their child and ensure that if problems later arise parents are equipped with the knowledge of all options.

Bullying of autistic people is widely reported in research and is often attributed to the characteristics of autism and the visible differences between autistic people and non-autistic

peers. This study shows that autism is not always the reason why autistic people are bullied. Toby experienced bullying because of his personal religious beliefs and his mothers' sexuality, and his social exclusion which can, in part, be attributed to his autistic characteristics. As far as Toby's parents were concerned, the school failed to keep him safe from bullying or deal with it in an appropriate way. It also appears that the values promoted by the school actively contributed to Toby's bullying. This highlights the need for schools, not only to have appropriate anti-bullying policies which include a universal understanding of bullying, procedures and training, particularly with a focus on the autism and SEN specific aspects of bullying, but also an assessment of their own values and culture they promote among their staff and pupils as it may be a large contributing factor to bullying. Further, teachers and school staff need to be trained to identify and deal with the bullying of children by both peers and other adults. This training should address prevention methods, such as how to establish friendships and create an inclusive classroom, what bullying is, signs to recognise when a child is experiencing bullying as some children may not be able to vocalise their bullying experiences, and how any accusations of bullying should be dealt with.

Although schools have a major role in dealing with bullying, NI itself continues to promote division through the continued segregation of its citizens depending on the community to which they belong, Protestant or Catholic. This will continue to be a problem as children learn to recognise differences from an early age. Until religion is divorced from schools and children are educated together, accepting and embracing diversity in schools will continue to be a challenge. Acceptance of diversity is an important aspect of inclusion of all pupils and should be modelled by teachers and staff within all schools. Further, NI politicians have a responsibility to normalise same-sex relationships by legalising same-sex marriage to align with the rest of the UK. This would help to prevent bullying that occurs because of differences in family composition.

Although NI is becoming more secular, Christianity continues to influence attitudes towards those who identify as being lesbian, gay or bisexual. This is because of the historical, and, in many cases, the continued rejection of non-heterosexual identities by the majority of the mainstream denominations (Reygan and Moane 2014). For many Christians, the influence of the interpretation of scripture from their church denomination will determine their views of same sex couples. On their account, Toby's parents faced sexual orientation discrimination from the principal of his primary school. Whether this was because of the principal's personal beliefs or the influence of religion on the school is unknown. Whatever the reason for her apparent discriminatory behaviour, this incident highlights the need for schools to confront stereotypical and prejudicial assumptions held about same sex families, especially as the shape of family is changing. Schools need to challenge and examine negative attitudes school staff may have about same sex parents by offering training to increase awareness, knowledge and sensitivity towards such families (Hart, Mourrot and Aros 2012). Further, children should be educated about different family types through the normalising of all types of family constructions rather than the traditional understanding of family. Normalising all types of family, including same sex families, would help to prevent homophobic bullying.

Toby's experience with school, although negative, led him and his family to a place they did not ever imagine finding themselves in but is one they have found extremely positive for their family. It would be useful to share some of the positive experiences and practices of home education with schools to give positive examples of how to cater to different educational needs. This would, of course, require more research on how to best achieve this.

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Declaration of Interest

No potential conflict of interest.

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