

FREEDOM IN THE NEW AGE



As the number of young people identifying as LGBT+ in the UK increases, reports have shown that our education system falls behind in combatting discrimination. Jade Evans spoke to Henry Poultney about his work to change this, and the impact it's having on Bristol's youth.

It's 5:34pm when I phone Henry Poultney. Despite exchanging emails for a few weeks, this will be the first time I've spoken to the man currently co-running Off The Record's LGBT+ Freedom Youth project – and there's no answer.

It only takes five minutes to get a call back from an incredibly kind voice (I welcome the distraction from my laundry), and from our discussion I gather that he's also incredibly busy.

"Hi, sorry about that! I'm so sorry it's taken so long – how are you?"

After joining Freedom Youth in July 2015, Henry has been working on a handful of projects, each one seemingly leading on to another. His most recent is a short film explaining gender identity entitled 'What Is Gender?'. He perks up when I mention that I recently watched it.

"I actually set up a group called Gender Jelly which was born from the film. We say gender is a bit like jelly, it's not fixed or set, it can take the shape you want it to. That's part of Freedom too, so we're doing more work around that and around gender. It's all about creating a very specific space for additional support and education."

Freedom Youth itself is a gender and sexuality group that works with LGBT+ people aged 13 to 19 to create a safe space for them to seek information, advice, and support. They meet every Tuesday at a private location to ensure

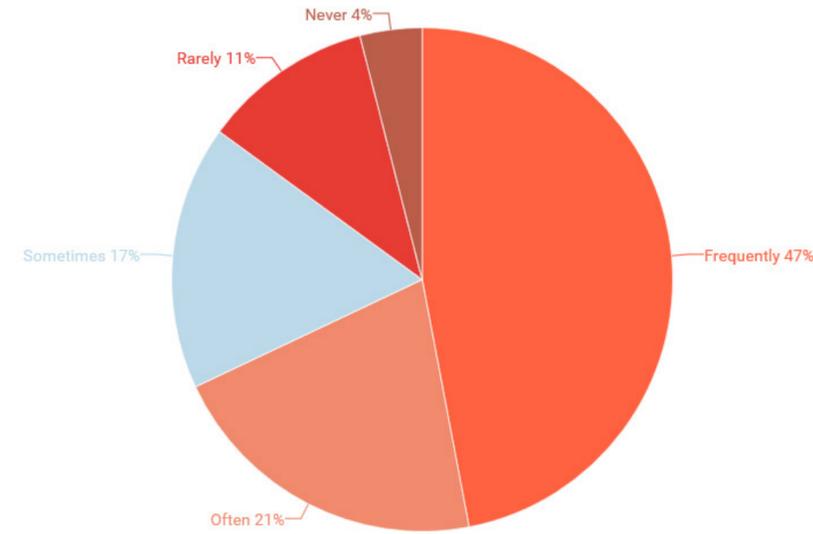
their members' privacy, running activities and workshops based off the young people's ideas.

"They're receiving support around gender and sexuality within the session and hopefully that's then giving them the tools and confidence to build and develop outside of the sessions. For every single person, the impact and how they use the group is really diverse and different. I think the one main thing, what a lot of our members' feedback is, is that it feels very much like a family."

Henry's official title at Freedom Youth is a transeducation worker, which has involved developing a project with EACH (Educational Action Challenging Homophobia) to tackle homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying in schools, with Henry focusing on transgender issues.

Over the past ten months this has involved collaborating with teachers and pupils to produce a set of lesson plans, funded by the Department for Education through the Government's Equalities Office, that address these issues. Ten schools across Bristol volunteered to be pilot schools to gauge both teachers' and pupils' responses to resources within the programme.

"I think it's really interesting, having asked the question to young people, how frequently are LGBT+ issues being talked about in schools, or if someone's being bullied, those kinds of things – what happens, how do you react? [...] It's about supporting them to feel more confident in developing



How often pupils hear homophobic language in school according to Stonewall's School Report 2012



Henry in SARI's (Stand Against Racism and Inequality) 2016 campaign. Courtesy of SARI.

LGBT+ groups in their own schools, so that's really quite fresh and new, especially when you think back to section 28 – I don't know if you've heard of that?"

I pull a face while I think before realising that he can't in fact see me, so I say the name rings a bell.

He goes on to explain what it is – section 28, full title 'Section 28: banning the promotion of homosexuality in schools', was a law repealed in 2003 that forbade teachers from discussing LGBT+ issues in any form within schools. Some teachers are still unaware of its repeal, and so gender and sexuality discussions are often swept under the rug out of fear.

65%
Secondary school teachers have heard pupils use homophobic or transphobic terms

2 in 5
Primary school teachers are unsure whether they're allowed to teach LGB issues

No improvement
In the number of teachers who believe their headmaster shows initiative to tackle homophobic bullying
Findings from Stonewall's 2014 Teacher's Report.

"That, I think, was what motivated me as a worker, because when I was at school, y'know, it – it was just never spoken about. On one occasion, teachers farmed a student from my class off the stage who'd decided to include a character coming out as gay in their play, and they were told 'no, you can't talk about that here or I'll lose my job'. LGBT+ education just didn't occur."

13 years after section 28, there's still no compulsory curriculum around LGBT+ issues. The current picture of LGBT+ education in British schools is an unequal one, varying from school to school.

According to Stonewall's 2014 Teacher's Report,

86% of secondary school teachers and 45% of primary school teachers say that pupils in their schools have faced homophobic bullying. The figures become even direr when taking into account that 55% and 42% of secondary and primary teachers respectively don't always discipline the use of homophobic language.

These factors combined are what make the implementation of projects such as EACH's all the more important.

"I think it's surprising that it's taken 13 years, which is quite a long time, but equally I think it's important to remember that it is being done now. That's the biggest thing that should be taken from it. And the fact that it's being supported by the Department for Education is just nothing but brilliant.

"It's just really crucial to ensure that this work is done to get it on the agenda, and much like the What Is Gender? film, I think it's really important for cohesion in schools and in the community. Everyone can talk about gender and sexuality, no matter what your gender or sexuality is."

To celebrate Freedom Youth's 21st year, they're currently working on collating the memories of members past and present to bring together into a book.

"The fact that people who may have left many, many years before have still been in touch and talking about their memories is great. It all costs nothing in terms of a memory, but it's just a lovely thing that's stayed solid through the past 20 years."

When I ask him what his favourite memory is, there's a smile in his voice.

"To be honest with you, I have a new favourite moment every week, every session. It's just that brilliant. Seeing people build confidence with each other, every single time you notice someone has flourished. It's not just about workers; it's about young people supporting each other too. I'd say that's probably my favourite part."