

Everyday, Embedded & Embraced: LGBTQ+ teachers' perspectives on LGBTQ+ inclusion in schools

A Llewellyn, Durham University, 2022

The Research

50 LGBTQ+ teachers from around the UK were interviewed during July and August 2020.ⁱ

“... sort of being honest in the same way as your heterosexual colleagues. If they're allowed to talk about their wife and children, why can't I talk about my husband and my children?”

(Gay, male, secondary school)ⁱⁱ

“Okay, let's deal with homophobic bullying, but let's not address the larger structural system that created it, which is the heteronormativity in schools and the culture”.

(Lesbian/gay, female, secondary school)

Findings: Schools

Policies and practice promoting LGBTQ+ inclusion between schools, and sometimes within schools, is **inconsistent** - what one participant described as a “postcode lottery”. Within this, senior figures effectively act as **‘gatekeepers’** to change, both enabling and restricting LGBTQ+ inclusion.

Whilst schools often had days or weeks dedicated to LGBTQ+ or broader inclusion, several schools also **embedded provision** throughout the **curriculum, staff training** and **induction**. An embedded curriculum moves beyond anti-bullyingⁱⁱⁱ, and emphasises LGBTQ+ as part of everyday teaching, including the positive framing of LGBTQ+ people and the use of inclusive language. This was easier in **Scotland**, where it is more clearly advocated by the Curriculum for Excellence.

Several schools started with a **curriculum audit**. Many schools made use of **external providers**, to either lead or support LGBTQ+ inclusion. These providers may offer **‘awards’**, which can provide structure for change, however this can also enable **tokenism** - where schools focus on obtaining the award rather than thoroughly embedding inclusion^{iv}.



“There was no plan for how we’re going to tackle homophobia.”

(Gay, male, secondary school)



Findings: LGBTQ+ Teachers

Many participants saw being LGBTQ+ as part of being a teacher - this honesty enabled the fostering of **positive relationships with students** of all ages. They often felt supported to be LGBTQ+ in their schools. Although many experienced **micro-aggressions**, and bullying. LGBTQ+ teachers were also **questioned** on **their gender presentation** and, at times, prevented from **discussing their personal lives** in schools. These reprimands were often framed via **school rules**, although these were not applied consistently and to heterosexual staff members^v.

Often the LGBTQ+ staff member **drove** LGBTQ+ inclusion, which can be viewed positively. However, this can also result in being seen as the **“gay tsar”** and there is **evidence of added emotional labour** via taking on this role. Not all LGBTQ+ staff felt they had the same opportunities to be **‘out’** and advocating for LGBTQ+ inclusion - there may be connotations for **intersections** with religion, race, gender and disability.



“And they basically said ... perhaps I should wear hair slides to make my gender more apparent and less confusing.”

(Lesbian/gay, non binary, primary school)



Findings: Students

LGBTQ+ teachers often wanted to make positive change for **their students** – they were aware that schools may be a safer place for LGBTQ+ students than their homes. Most concerns were for **trans and non-binary students**, who were at most risk from exclusion – schools also tended to react to the presence of a trans student, rather than plan for the possibility.

There are examples of schools using '**protecting childhood innocence**'^{vi} to prevent LGBTQ+ inclusion. In contrast, many LGBTQ+ teachers valued student voice, with students sometimes being the **driving force** behind change. However, there were examples where student surveys were used to present the school as safe and thus not to improve LGBTQ+ inclusion.

More broadly, difference was often explored through **stories**. **Libraries** were also deemed important for older students.

The majority of participants thought **adults were more resistant to LGBTQ+ inclusion than students**. There was a small number of examples where this was the contrary, and a very small number of participants were actively **bullied by students**.



“I have decided that I can no longer be a secondary school teacher because I’m gay there is some harassment every day.”

(Gay, male, secondary school)



Key Recommendations for Schools

1. Leadership should take an active role in LGBTQ+ inclusion.
2. Focus on creating and embedding systems and structures that are not reliant on individuals. A whole school approach is imperative.
3. Be proactive and plan to implement LGBTQ+ inclusion, rather than reacting to situations.
4. Know your school – what is your starting point. This may include a curriculum audit, or student survey and student voice.
5. Training should be for all staff, including non-teaching staff. It should be informative, impart knowledge and give staff accessible ways to implement policy and change.
6. Be aware of diversity within LGBTQ+ - both within the categories and in relation to intersections with other structural categories, such as race, religion, disability and gender.
7. Ensure LGBTQ+ provision works for all members of the community including, students, staff, parents and guardians.
8. Use students and staff to support change. Students can be active participants or leaders.
9. Use outside groups and experts but be careful of tokenistic implementation of policies and practice.
10. Use books and libraries and stories.
11. Use religion positively – work with religious community members and/or narratives of kindness, acceptance and love.
12. LGBTQ+ inclusion should be about education – including conversations and consideration of language.
13. LGBTQ+ inclusion should be every day, embedded and embraced - one off lessons or one week of events may maintain LGBTQ+ as something that little bit different.

- i. For more project research details see Llewellyn, A. (2022) Probing Power and Spaces Within Online Interviews: LGBTQ+ teachers and being (in and ex)cluded in schools. In *Sage Research Methods Cases*. Thanks to Max Kirk for interview support.
- ii. The identities are from the information given and the preference of the participant.
- iii. Whilst anti-bullying can give entry points to inclusion, it constrains LGBTQ+ people to a victim narrative. See Formby, E. (2015). Limitations of Focusing on Homophobic, Biphobic and Transphobic 'Bullying' to Understand and Address LGBT Young People's Experiences Within and Beyond School. *Sex Education*, 15(6), 626-640
- iv. See Ahmed, S., (2007). "You end up doing the document rather than doing the doing": diversity, race equality and the politics of documentation. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30 (4), 590–609 or Ahemd, S. (2012) *On being included*. Duke University Press.
- v. This has been called an example of 'heterosexual privilege' – see Connell, C. (2015). *School's Out: Gay and Lesbian Teachers in the Classroom*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- vi. This can be a reductive way of framing children and is a common legitimization technique without explanation. See Meyer, A. (2007). The moral rhetoric of childhood. *Childhood*, 14(1), 85–104.

Contact



a.e.llewellyn@durham.ac.uk

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