

**'Won't somebody please think of the gays!'**  
**Investigating the Experiences of LGBT Students in British Schools**

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*Abstract* – Over the last 50 years there has been great societal progress on LGBT rights. Same sex couples now have full marriage rights, transgender people can legally transition gender, and there is greater LGBT visibility than ever before. However, in spite of these positive developments, homophobia, biphobia and transphobia still persist in society today, especially in schools. A recent Stonewall study found that some 45% of LGBT students have experienced homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying at school, approximately two thirds of LGBT students have self-harmed, and more than half of those students do not have an adult they can talk to about being LGBT (Bradlow, Bartram and Guasp, 2017). This article argues that, as institutions that exist to help young people transition into adulthood, schools are uniquely placed to support LGBT young people as they come to terms with who they are and should do more to support their LGBT students. The author will draw on their experiences as a trainee teacher in a state secondary school in South East England to examine current educational practices. A review of literature will then follow which focuses on government and school policies concerning LGBT issues, and paints a national picture of the school experiences of LGBT young people. Finally, the author will make recommendations for how schools can improve their LGBT policies and reflect on the implications of these policies for future educational practice.

*Keywords:* British schools, secondary education, LGBT, sexuality, gender, diversity, inclusion, policy, bullying, teaching

## **Introduction**

Over the last century, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) individuals have seen themselves go from outcasts in society to being legally allowed to marry their same sex partner and transition gender (R. Jones & Clarke, 2007). However, despite significant societal progress, homophobia, biphobia and transphobia are far from being eradicated in many public institutions today. One such institution is the school, where bullying and heteronormativity can have a major impact on the school experiences of LGBT students (Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009).

As a beginning teacher, I was keen to explore this issue further. In June 2021, I completed a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) in Modern Foreign Languages, one of several routes into secondary school teaching in the UK. The course involved a nine-month placement in a state school in Oxfordshire – henceforth referred to as the ‘internship school’. Alongside university classes on how to teach our subject areas, PGCE students also receive a training in how to handle wider issues affecting students’ wellbeing, such as social background or special educational needs (SEN), or indeed, being LGBT. My interest in this area stems from my own school experience as an openly lesbian student. My school was not accepting of my sexuality, placing the blame for the homophobic bullying I experienced back on me. There was no support for LGBT students, such as a support group, or openly LGBT members of staff. Such a casually homophobic environment led many of my peers to not come out until they were at university.

Hence, I was keen to investigate how schools can create an open and supportive environment for their LGBT students – a question relevant to me as a beginning teacher, but one that will remain relevant throughout my whole career, as I will always have LGBT students in my care. These students deserve to be listened to and supported as they come to terms with who they are and go through the difficult process of coming out to their friends and family, not all of whom may be accepting. Furthermore, they deserve to receive an education that is inclusive of them, their needs and their experiences, not just one that treats them as an afterthought or ignores them completely.

Staff at my internship school claimed the school was very ‘open’ and ‘tolerant’. However, as the ‘school-based exploration’ section will detail below, there seemed to be little evidence to support such claims. For example, there were no LGBT inclusive displays around the school. I also heard some members of staff ‘deadnaming’ a transgender student (that is, calling them by their old ‘dead’ name that had since been changed to another) and referring to them using the wrong pronouns. The school had only one openly LGBT member of staff who did what they could to raise awareness of LGBT issues and support LGBT students, but it seemed that their efforts went unnoticed by other members of staff. Overall, the school appeared to be making attempts to be inclusive, but there was scope for it to do much more. Research suggests that this model of dealing with LGBT issues falls broadly in line with that of other schools in the UK (Bradlow et al., 2017; Guasp, 2014).

### **School-based exploration**

My school-based exploration was twofold. First, I interviewed members of staff responsible for enacting government and school policy. Second, I spoke to members of staff who were more aware of pupil experiences outside of curriculum lessons, as

research and personal anecdotal evidence suggest that experiences outside of lessons are the biggest factors in shaping young LGBT people's perceptions of school life (Jones & Clarke, 2007). These staff members comprised the School Counsellor, the school's PSHE (Personal, Social and Health Education) Coordinator, who is also the Head of Year 11 (students aged 15–16), and the LGBT member of staff, who is a pastoral assistant. This latter, as a member of the LGBT community, would be far more aware of issues affecting LGBT students within school. Unfortunately, I was unable to talk to any students who identified as LGBT; due to the private nature of sexuality and gender, I did not feel it was right to approach them without first having built substantial rapport.

The school's PSHE curriculum specifically covers LGBT relationships and families in the Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) units. The aim of these particular units is to normalise LGBT lives and to raise awareness around the prejudice and discrimination that the LGBT community has faced in the past and continues to face today. Teaching is also conducted through a series of assemblies, with roughly one assembly on an LGBT-related topic per term. Such topics include spotlights on famous LGBT individuals like Alan Turing, and sessions on why homophobic language like 'that's so gay' is offensive. These lessons and assemblies were designed in collaboration with the LGBT member of staff, in order to ensure accuracy of both content and language.

The school used to have an LGBT support group; this was an initiative established by sixth form students (ages 16–18) for other students in the school, but which discontinued once the founding students left the school. No attempts had been made to restore it, except until the LGBT member of staff started at the school in September 2020. Unfortunately, this member of staff is unable to re-establish the group due to pandemic restrictions, but they hope it can resume once school life returns to normal. Meanwhile, the school is running a peer listening scheme, where sixth formers can act as mentors to younger students. Other support is offered to students on a one-to-one, individualised basis, often through external agencies such as Topaz, a charity in Oxford offering support for LGBT young people.

Both the LGBT member of staff and the PSHE Coordinator considered the school to be 'lucky' in the sense that students are overall very inclusive of LGBT students, and homophobic, biphobic and transphobic (HBT) bullying is not prevalent. By way of contrast, the School Counsellor questioned how much of an impact the school's 'raising awareness' objective has had on LGBT students themselves. She engages with pupils who are LGBT, or think they might be, which is an elephant in the room. Both she and the pupil know that being LGBT is a factor influencing the student's situation; however, the fact is not discussed, and this despite it being beneficial to talk about LGBT matters in a school-based therapy environment.

Curriculum lessons are largely devoid of LGBT content – though this is somewhat changing, especially in English and Drama. Displays around the school do not contain any same-sex couples or transgender individuals, and there were no books with explicitly LGBT themes to be found in the library. LGBT-related policies on the school website were also very difficult to locate.

Following this school-based exploration, I developed three research questions:

- To what extent are government and school policies supportive of LGBT students?
- Does the lived experiences of LGBT students correlate with those policies?
- What action can schools take to better support their LGBT students?

## 1. Literature Review

### 1.1 The legacy of section 28

When considering legislation that explicitly addresses the treatment of LGBT issues in schools, section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 is a good place to start, due to its 'notori[ety]' (Greenland & Nunney, 2008, p. 243) and lasting impact on schools today (Lee, 2019):

*A local authority shall not—*

*(a) intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality;*

*(b) promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship.*

Whilst section 28 technically did not apply to schools, many teachers believed that they were subject to the statute (Walker & Bates, 2016). Thus, the ramifications of section 28 were extremely significant, as schools actively avoided addressing topics with LGBT themes in class (Burton, 1995; Ellis & High, 2004; Vincent, 2014) and teachers felt less inclined to challenge homophobic bullying and support LGBT pupils (Warwick et al., 2001).

Section 28 was repealed in England in 2003, under section 122 of the Local Government Act 2003. However, many local authorities chose to retain it in policies with similar wording, a decision which was uncontested by the majority of schools within their jurisdiction (Adams et al., 2004). Indeed, of the schools involved in a 2013 study, more than 40 were found to have sex and relationship education policies

prohibiting the 'promotion of homosexuality' and replicating section 28 (Morris, 2013). Thus, many teachers continued to avoid the discussion of LGBT topics in school, as they were unsure of where the boundaries of policy actually lay (Greenland & Nunney, 2008).

There has been a wealth of literature written on section 28 and its lasting legacy (Edwards et al., 2016; Ellis, 2007; Greenland & Nunney, 2008; Lee, 2019; Nixon & Givens, 2007). This legacy persists even over 15 years after its repeal, with many staff who had taught under the legislation remaining less open to discussing LGBT themes. Stonewall's 2014 Teachers' Report (Guasp, 2014) surveyed 1,832 teachers across the UK and found that a third of them had yet to '[address] issues of sexual orientation in the classroom' (Guasp, 2014, p. 29) and that, should a student 'raise a question on sexual orientation in the classroom' (Chapman & Wright, 2008, p. 21), one in five teachers would not feel confident responding.

Section 28 enforced a culture of 'heterosexism' – 'the assumption that everybody is heterosexual' (Chapman & Wright, 2008, p. 21) – by implying that 'homosexuality' can be 'promoted'. This implication is based on the presumption that heterosexuality cannot be promoted, since it is 'natural and organic' (Marston, 2015). Schools maintain strongly entrenched heterosexist attitudes, as widely-evidenced in research literature, with researchers expressing particular worry about the detrimental impact this can have on LGBT students (Bridge, 2010; Chapman & Wright, 2008; Epstein, 1994; Forrest, 2000; Mehra & Braquet, 2006).

## 1.2 Current legislation

Current legislation is slowly beginning to counteract the legacy of section 28 by explicitly requiring schools to teach LGBT topics. This is part of the Department of Education's new statutory requirements, which came into force in September 2020. Under these measures, relationships and sex education became compulsory in all state-funded secondary schools, and health education was made compulsory in all maintained schools. Schools had until the summer of 2021 to implement this new teaching. The statutory guidance states:

*37. [...] At the point at which schools consider it appropriate to teach their pupils about LGBT, they should ensure that this content is fully integrated into their programmes of study for this area of the curriculum rather than delivered as a standalone unit or lesson. Schools are free to determine how they do this, and we expect all pupils to have been taught LGBT content at a timely point as part of this area of the curriculum (Department for Education, 2019).*

Still relatively new, this policy has not yet been implemented by every school, and so it is still unclear what impact these changes will have on LGBT students and their

experiences of school. Indeed, there has been no research published on this policy to date. However, it should be noted that Scott et al. (2020) examined the RSE guidance as a whole shortly after its initial publication. The authors believed that the guidance is 'deliberately non-prescriptive' and 'implementation is likely to vary considerably' (Scott et al., 2020, p. 676). In other words, there is still the potential for schools to only pay minimal attention to LGBT topics. The guidance accords with the recommendation made by Stonewall in their Teachers' Report (2014) that the Department for Education should 'issue statutory Personal, Social and Health Education and Sex and Relationships Education guidance which is inclusive of lesbian, gay, and bisexual pupils and those with same-sex parents' (Guasp, 2014, p. 37). Furthermore, Ellis and High (2004) advocate for RSE lessons as best practice, and Ellis (2007; 2015) argues that LGBT content should be fully integrated into these lessons, rather than taught as the 'gay and lesbian issues' lesson (Macintosh, 2007, p. 33).

Whilst it is encouraging to see that research has been taken into consideration when designing this guidance, there is a strong argument that it does not go far enough in ensuring that schools teach a fully LGBT-inclusive curriculum. For example, Formby (2013, 2015) argues that limiting discussions around gender and sexuality to PSHE lessons only restricts students' chances to explore societal influences and challenge heteronormative attitudes across the wider curriculum. This is a position shared by Marston (2015), who calls for 'cross-curricular coverage' (Marston, 2015, p. 166) of LGBT content, and Jacob (2013).

### 1.3 School policy

With school policy governed by legislation (S1 School, 2020a), it may seem redundant for researchers to examine school policies. However, as discussed above, each school will interpret government legislation differently (Scott et al., 2020). Examining a school's policies is a useful way to gain insight into the school's interpretation of legislation, and with that its priorities and beliefs. These foci, in turn, will shape how much attention is paid to HBT bullying or teaching LGBT history, for example. School policy objectives of this kind will no doubt have an impact on LGBT students' experiences in school. It made sense therefore to investigate policies at my internship school that directly addressed LGBT issues and which would directly impact upon LGBT students' experiences. The policies in question are: (i) the anti-bullying policy, (ii) the equality information and objectives policy, (iii) the RSE policy, and (iv) the transgender policy. Each of these is examined below:

- (i) The **anti-bullying policy** references homophobic remarks as a form that verbal bullying can take – though it makes no mention of biphobic or transphobic bullying (S1 School, 2019).

- (ii) The **equality information and objectives policy** (S1 School, 2020a) references HBT bullying as *an example of a disadvantage* to students that the school aims to remove or minimise. However, despite this explicit example, there are no specific *equality objectives* in this policy to address HBT bullying. This begs the question: if HBT bullying is an issue, as the policy suggests, why are there no objectives to address this? There seems to be a gap of support for LGBT students here, and weak cross-policy cohesion when this fact is read with the paragraph above: that about the school's anti-bullying policy making inadequate reference to HBT bullying
- (iii) The **RSE policy** (S1 School, 2020b) asserts that RSE lessons should aim to 'create a positive culture around issues of sexuality and relationships'. It also explicitly states that families can include LGBT parents. However, this policy being based on the government RSE legislation discussed above, it suffers from the same shortcomings as the latter and for the same reasons; that is, the policy confines discussions around gender and sexuality to RSE lessons solely, and it denies students the opportunity to explore these issues across the wider curriculum.
- (iv) The **transgender policy** (S1 School, 2020c) is dated January 2020. Around the time of this policy being implemented, a student at the school was beginning to transition (female to male), inviting speculation as to whether the policy was created in response to this. The LGBT member of staff informed me that they (the staff member) were consulted in the creation of this policy, and that they also work closely with the transitioning student as a pastoral assistant assigned to his year group. The policy itself is very comprehensive in covering relevant legislation and government guidance, the steps that the school is taking towards gender neutrality, and procedures for responding to transphobic bullying. It also details arrangements for transitioning students, such as name changes (including when the school can and cannot use a chosen name over a legal name, with advice for changing a legal name), sex-specific vaccinations, and the use of changing and toilet facilities. Additionally, the policy has a glossary of terms at the end. It is encouraging to see such a detailed and thorough policy, although this does draw attention to how vague the other policies happen to be.

Some extended discussion of the school's anti-bullying policy and transgender policy will now follow:

Where research on LGBT issues in UK schools is lacking, we can turn to US-based research to guide our analysis of anti-bullying policies in England and Wales. The US operates a different educational system to that of the UK, but anti-bullying policies are broadly similar in both of these nations (cf. the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) Model School Anti-Bullying and Harassment Policy (GLSEN, 2019)).

Research in US schools has found that anti-bullying policies that are explicitly supportive of LGBT students result in a more positive school climate for those students (Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009; Goodenow et al., 2006; Szalacha, 2003). This would imply that equivalent policies at my internship school in England are helping LGBT students in similar ways.

However, the mere existence of LGBT-supportive policies does not necessarily guarantee concrete positive change. A 2013 study of over 5,000 LGBT secondary school students in the US found that, whilst a 'comprehensive [anti-bullying] policy' (J. G. Kosciw et al., 2013, p. 55) was linked to LGBT students having a more positive self-esteem, it did not result in less victimisation nor improved academic performance for these students (Kosciw et al., 2013). Moreover, the researchers of this study did not examine the antibullying policies themselves, but rather asked the students their perceptions of the policies, which suggests that an effective anti-bullying policy is one that is considered to be supportive in the eyes of the students. It follows, therefore, that supportive policies are the minimum a school can offer to LGBT students and rendered meaningless if not acted on, and that anti-bullying policies should be designed in collaboration with students (S1 School, 2019).

Where my internship school's policies did concern LGBT issues, the focus of these policies was largely on HBT bullying; this narrow focus has also been criticised. In the UK, researchers have argued that school policies which focus mainly on HBT bullying are deficient, as they can lead to schools perceiving individuals in a limited fashion as either bullies or victims, and responses thereto as either punishment or support. This could result in a missed opportunity for schools to conduct a broader examination of how heteronormativity influences their policy-making and conduct, and in turn, how a school's institutional response influences its students' lives. Instead, schools should work to provide young people with an alternative narrative to that of bullies and victims, and to challenge heteronormativity within their curriculum, broader school environment, and society itself (Formby, 2015; Pascoe, 2013; Payne & Smith, 2012, 2013).

Researchers have also drawn attention to the fact that a heavy focus on HBT bullying means that schools often overlook the impact an unsupportive home environment can have on some LGBT students, lamenting that this is often missing from schools' policies (Formby, 2015; T. Jones & Hillier, 2013) – as was the case in my internship school. Schools should therefore work to integrate LGBT issues fully into the curriculum by teaching the science of sexual orientation and the legal rights of LGBT students (Jacob, 2013) and update their policies to reflect this approach, rather than only talking about LGBT issues in RSE lessons and holding 'tokenistic' (Formby, 2015, p. 634) assemblies about HBT bullying.



It is interesting to note that while my internship school did have a transgender policy, there was no policy equivalent for LGB students. Reasons for this are not specified anywhere in existing documents nor elsewhere on the school's website. It could be that supporting transgender students requires the school to do more for them than for LGB students, which makes a transgender policy necessary for certain rules to be clarified – for example, granting transgender students time out of school to attend medical appointments (Taylor, 2002).

## 2. The lived experiences of LGBT students

This exploration of school policy led me to question its effectiveness: that is, what LGBT students' experiences of school are *actually* like under these policies. I looked at both national and regional data on HBT bullying:

- A 2017 Stonewall study of 3,713 LGBT students across the UK found that 45% had experienced HBT bullying at school (Bradlow et al., 2017).
- Within Oxfordshire, the Oxfordshire Secondary Bullying Survey 2019, a survey of 4,786 students across the county, found that 70% of respondents said they heard 'people being called names that insulted [the fact that they are] gay, lesbian, or bisexual' (Oxfordshire County Council, 2019, p. 18). For transphobic insults, this figure stood much lower at 26% (Oxfordshire County Council, 2019), but it is unlikely that this difference is owed to there being a more accepting environment for transgender students, as only 14% of respondents believed an openly transgender student would be 'safe from bullying' at their school (Oxfordshire County Council, 2019, p. 6). For openly LGB students, the figure is slightly higher: 17% of respondents believed that they would be safe from bullying at their school (Oxfordshire County Council, 2019). This discrepancy could be explained by the lower proportion of transgender individuals in the population and at the surveyed students' schools (the Office for National Statistics estimates that 2.2% of the UK population identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual (Office for National Statistics, 2018), whilst 200,000-500,000 people in the UK (0.3%-0.75% of the population) are transgender (Government Equalities Office, 2018)).

The negative school environment that bullying creates has a detrimental impact on young people's attendance and engagement with education (T. Jones & Hillier, 2013; Rivers, 2011). Stonewall found that 40% of students who have experienced HBT bullying have skipped school because of it, whilst 52% report that it has negatively impacted their plans for future education (Bradlow et al., 2017). A negative school environment and experiences of HBT bullying also lead to lower academic achievement (Formby, 2014; Kosciw et al., 2013). It has a detrimental impact on mental health: 61% of LGB students have self-harmed, with 22% having attempted taking their own life. The figures for

transgender students are even more alarming: 84% have self-harmed and 45% have tried to take their own life (Bradlow et al., 2017). The effects of negative school environment are widely attested elsewhere in the literature, with studies consistently showing that LGBT students have an increased risk of substance abuse, self-harm, depression and suicide (Birkett et al., 2009; McNamee et al., 2008; Robinson & Espelage, 2011; Savin-Williams, 1994).

Russell et al. (2012) propose that prejudice-based bullying – also called identity-based bullying – may have a greater detrimental effect on students than non-prejudicial forms. Charlesworth (2015) supports this view, adding that HBT bullying can be particularly impactful since it is not always recognised or reported. Indeed, only 29% of LGBT students have reported that teachers intervened during an HBT bullying incident (Bradlow et al., 2017). This low percentage may be owing to teachers not recognising the incident for the bullying it is, having not been trained to respond appropriately to such incidents. The majority of teachers will know to challenge offensive language such as 'that's so gay', where 'gay' means 'rubbish' or 'stupid' (Marston, 2015); challenging it is the main way in which schools aim to reduce HBT bullying. But, if the incident does not involve what teachers have been trained to identify as homophobic language, or if teachers do not know that the student is LGBT, they may mistake the offending treatment for 'banter'.

Nevertheless, there remains a nationwide focus on challenging the use of 'gay' as meaning 'rubbish' or 'stupid', to the extent that Ofsted expects schools to include this as part of their strategies to combat HBT bullying (Ofsted, 2013). The effectiveness of this strategy should, however, be brought into question. 86% of LGBT students nationally and 87% of students in Oxfordshire regularly hear phrases such as 'That's so gay!' at school (Bradlow et al., 2017; Oxfordshire County Council, 2019). It could be counterargued that use of such language is seldom an actual bullying incident; rarely is it used when referring to an individual (Charlesworth, 2015; Marston, 2015). Indeed, Marston (2015) found that the majority of students using such language are not themselves homophobic, and that it is also part of LGBT students' vernacular. By simply labelling such language as 'homophobic' and adopting a zero-tolerance approach, schools might fail actually to change attitudes or understand their students' worldviews (Formby, 2013; Marston, 2015; Monk, 2011).

Schools' failure to understand their LGBT students has been a prevalent issue for some time. Jones and Clarke's (2007) study showed that schools were unsure as how they should respond to the needs of their LGB students, particularly those who were openly 'out'. Unfortunately, this situation has not improved, despite the progress that wider society has been making to become more accepting of LGBT people. Marston (2015) reports that schools often approach external agencies to obtain more information as their LGBT support systems are too youth-led. Indeed, students may be more knowledgeable on this topic than school staff.

This lack of knowledge and understanding among staff is manifested in LGBT students' use of the internet as an information resource: 53% of LGBT students are unable to discuss being LGBT with an adult at school, and 60% do not have an adult they can talk to at home (Bradlow et al., 2017). Therefore, the vast majority of students turn to the internet for answers. In 2010, 80% of LGB young people used the internet as their first source of information about their sexuality (Bridge, 2010). Taylor (2002) reported similar findings for transgender young people, when the internet was still in infancy. Today, 96% of LGBT students have used the Internet to further their understanding of their sexuality and/or gender identity (Bradlow et al., 2017). It is worth considering that while the internet is doubtlessly a rich resource for education, teenage students conducting personal research on LGBT topics can readily fall on false information without them even knowing. Just as schools work to eliminate misconceptions in academic subjects, so too should they ensure that students are accessing credible and accurate sources for LGBT issues.

### 3. Recommendations for schools

There is no shortage of suggestions in the literature for how schools can support their LGBT students and create an environment that is truly inclusive. Broad consensus exists on the following recommendations:

- First, the most impactful direct action a school can take is to set up an LGBT support group (R. Jones & Clarke, 2007). An in-school support group not only has a direct positive impact on students' mental health (Goodenow et al., 2006; Heck et al., 2011; Toomey et al., 2011), it also reduces victimisation of LGBT students and, by extension, rates of HBT bullying (Kosciw et al., 2010; Toomey et al., 2011). A support group can also lead to increasing LGBT students' engagement in education, with improved attendance and academic attainment (Goodenow et al., 2006; Jacob, 2013).
- Secondly, it is imperative that schools create a curriculum that is fully inclusive of LGBT history, rights, and activism (Linville, 2004; O'Leary, 2005) and which normalises discussion of LGBT issues in all subjects (Bradlow et al., 2017; Formby, 2014; Jacob, 2013; R. Jones & Clarke, 2007; Kosciw et al., 2013; Marston, 2015). The curriculum should also include RSE that encompasses LGBT relationships and families and provides information on sexual health for same-sex couples (Bradlow et al., 2017; Formby & Donovan, 2020; A. Jones, 2011; Marston, 2015; Scott et al., 2020).
- Furthermore, school libraries should provide information on a range of LGBT topics (Bradlow et al., 2017; Walker & Bates, 2016). These topics include: coming

out (Alexander & Miselis, 2007; Linville, 2004; Mehra & Braquet, 2006; Norman, 1999); self-acceptance (O'Leary, 2005; Taylor, 2002); and both real and fictional stories with LGBTQ characters (Clyde & Lobban, 2001; Levithan, 2004; Linville, 2004; Taylor, 2002).

- Finally, schools should provide staff with comprehensive training on sexuality and gender, so that they can be in a position to offer support to LGBT students as needed (Adams et al., 2004; Ellis & High, 2004). Research suggests that supportive staff members can go some way to counteracting negative home environments and rates of HBT bullying, which results in improved mental health of LGBT students (Bradlow et al., 2017; Greenland & Nunney, 2008; Kosciw et al., 2013; Marston, 2015). A supportive staff body should also include a counselling team trained to deal with the struggles LGBT students often face, and openly LGBT members of staff who can act as positive role models for LGBT students. The presence of counsellors and positive role models increases students' self-acceptance and improves their mental health (Bradlow et al., 2017; Edwards et al., 2016; Guasp, 2014).

These four recommendations can be readily applied to my internship school. The school would benefit from having an LGBT support group run by both students and staff; this way of organising the group would allow it to continue to operate as students and staff leave the school and new members join. Staff would also benefit from comprehensive training on LGBT issues, including, for example: the science of sexuality and gender; how to support LGBT students with unstable home lives; a 'dos and don'ts' list of what to say and not to say when a student comes out (especially in the case of transgender students); and how to combat HBT bullying. Subject curricula could be broadened to include more LGBT topics with teaching on LGBT figures in history, texts with LGBT characters in English literature, and books with explicit LGBT themes made available in the library. Additionally, given the school's anti-bullying policy is due for review, it would be wise, if not essential, to invite a diverse group of LGBT students to take part in policy discussions and contribute ideas for making the policy more inclusive of LGBT students and other minorities.

## Conclusion

LGBT students need constant support from schools; it is not enough to simply normalise the lives they lead. Society has made noticeable progress in preventing discrimination against LGBT people and granting them more rights and visibility, but the better treatment that these provisions now guarantee is still far from ideal. LGBT people continue to face homophobia and transphobia from strangers, from their peers, and sometimes even from their own families (Bradlow et al., 2017). These LGBT-phobic

voices can cause great psychological damage to the people they target. While LGBT adults may eventually develop the ability to withstand this discrimination, the harrowing impact of these behaviours on young LGBT teenagers cannot be ignored any longer. It is therefore crucial for LGBT students to access adequate support and to feel accepted by the people who surround them; they should be treated with equal dignity beside their non-LGBT peers. This is where schools have a crucial part to play. As institutions that exist to help young people transition into adulthood, schools are best placed to offer LGBT students strong support and care – through establishing LGBT support groups that help students build a sense of community, presenting positive LGBT role models, and counselling for students in need. Schools should also aim to include LGBT-inclusive curricula in every subject, provide LGBT materials in the library, and offer school staff training on how to deal confidently with HBT bullying and other forms of discrimination.

Writing from a personal standpoint, I have long been aware of the kind of treatment LGBT students face in schools, having experienced homophobic bullying myself and worked with LGBT students before starting the PGCE teacher training course. Conducting this investigation has made me far more aware of the pivotal role schools have in creating an environment of acceptance for LGBT students. It is hoped that schools will come to instigate LGBT-focused policies and supports such as those discussed above. Furthermore, the research has opened my eyes to what I as an individual teacher can do to affect concrete change: by ensuring the language I use is always inclusive of all genders and sexualities, and by being a positive LGBT role model for my students. I am determined to be an advocate for LGBT students throughout my teaching career, an advocate who ensures that LGBT students feel accepted in their schooling and later years.

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