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

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

Keywords: LGBTQ+, sexuality, gender, secondary education, diversity, inclusion, education policy, bullying, teaching

Introduction

Over the last century, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ+)[1] individuals have seen themselves go from being regarded as outcasts in society to securing rights to marry their same sex partner and transition gender (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 experiences of LGBTQ+ students (Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009).

I wished to explore this issue further during my teacher training. In June 2021 I completed a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), one of several formative routes into secondary school teaching in the UK. The course involved a nine-month placement in a state school in South East England – henceforth 'internship school' – and university classes on a wide range of issues affecting students' wellbeing such as social background, special educational needs (SEN), or indeed, being LGBTQ+.

Staff at my internship school claimed the school was very 'open' and 'tolerant'. However, as detailed in the 'school-based exploration' section below, there seemed to be little evidence supporting such claims – for example, no LGBTQ+ inclusive displays in the school. I also heard some staff members 'deadnaming' a trans student, which 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 one openly LGBTQ+ staff member who tried to support LGBTQ+ students, but their efforts were not recognised by colleagues. Overall, the school was making attempts

[1] A note on terminology: the terms used in this article have been chosen with a view to be as inclusive as possible of individuals who identify with the queer community. The two acronyms commonly used for referring to the queer community are LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans) and LGBTQ (plus queer). A '+' is sometimes added after the Q in recognition of individuals who may not fall under LGBTQ – for example, those who identify as asexual. In the interests of inclusivity, the acronym LGBTQ+ has been adopted for this article.

Where possible, the term 'trans', instead of 'transgender', is used, in order to include individuals who may identify as trans, but not transgender. Generally, trans includes anyone whose gender is different to the sex they were assigned at birth, for instance, a non-binary person assigned female at birth. Transgender, on the other hand, is more often used in reference to individuals whose gender identity is the opposite of their assigned sex: that is, female to male, or male to female.

to be inclusive, but there was scope for it to do much more. Research suggests that this model of dealing with LGBTQ+ issues falls broadly in line with that of other schools in the UK (Bradlow et al., 2017; Guasp, 2014).

School-based exploration[2]

My school-based exploration was twofold. First, I interviewed staff responsible for enacting government and school policy. Second, I spoke to staff who were more aware of pupil experiences outside of curriculum lessons, as research and personal anecdotal evidence suggest that non-curricular experiences are the biggest factors shaping LGBTQ+ young people's perceptions of school life (Jones & Clarke, 2007). These staff members included 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 LGBTQ+ staff member, who is a pastoral assistant. This latter, as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, would be far more aware of issues affecting LGBTQ+ students within the school. Unfortunately, I was unable to talk to any students who identified as LGBTQ+; given the private nature of sexuality and gender, I did not feel it was right to approach students without having first built substantial rapport.

The school's PSHE curriculum specifically covers LGBTQ+ relationships and families in the Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) units. The aim of these units is to normalise LGBTQ+ lives and to raise awareness of the prejudice and discrimination that the LGBTQ+ 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 LGBTQ+-related topic per term. Such assemblies include spotlights on famous LGBTQ+ individuals like Alan Turing, and sessions on why homophobic language like 'That's so gay.' is offensive. These lessons and

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[2] This is a case study based on school observations, interviews, and reviews of literature. The research methodology requires a lengthier discussion and will not be covered in this article.

assemblies were designed in collaboration with the LGBTQ+ staff member to ensure accuracy of both content and language.

The school used to have an LGBTQ+ support group. This was an initiative established by sixth form students (ages 16-18) for other students in the school, but discontinued once the founding students left the school. No attempts had been made to restore it until the LGBTQ+ staff member started at the school in September 2020.[3] Meanwhile, the school runs 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 basis, often through external agencies such as Topaz, a charity in Oxford offering support for LGBTQ+ young people.

Both the LGBTQ+ staff member and the PSHE Coordinator considered the school to be 'lucky', in the sense that all students are generally very inclusive of LGBTQ+ students, and homophobic, biphobic, and transphobic (HBT) bullying is not prevalent. By way of contrast, the School Counsellor questioned how much impact the school's 'raising awareness' objective has had on LGBTQ+ students themselves. She engages with pupils who are LGBTQ+, or think they might be, and this often becomes an elephant in the room; both she and the pupil in conversation know that being LGBTQ+ is a factor influencing the student's situation. However, despite her belief that it would be beneficial to discuss this in a school-based therapy environment, the matter is rarely touched upon.

Curriculum lessons do not cover much LGBTQ+ content – though this is changing, especially in English and Drama. Displays around the school do not include same-sex couples or trans individuals, and there are no books with explicitly LGBTQ+ themes to be found in the library. LGBTQ+-related policies on the school website are also difficult to locate.

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[3] Unfortunately, this staff member was unable to re-establish the group in the 2020-21 academic year due to pandemic restrictions.

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

1. To what extent are government and school policies supportive of LGBTQ+ students?

2. Do the experiences of LGBTQ+ students documented in academic literature correlate with these legislation and policies?

3. According to literature, what action can schools take to better support their LGBTQ+ students?

Literature Review

The legacy of section 28

When considering legislation that explicitly addresses the treatment of LGBTQ+ issues in schools, section 28 of the *Local Government Act 1988* is a good place to start, for 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 schools were subject to the statute (Walker & Bates, 2016). Thus, the ramifications of section 28 were significant, as schools actively avoided addressing topics with LGBTQ+ themes in class (Burton, 1995; Ellis & High, 2004; Vincent, 2014). Teachers felt less inclined to challenge homophobic bullying and support LGBTQ+ 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, under similar wording, a decision 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 RSE policies replicating section 28 (Morris, 2013). Thus, many teachers continued to avoid the discussion of LGBTQ+ topics in school, as they were unsure where the boundaries of policy fell (Greenland & Nunney, 2008).

A wealth of literature has been written on section 28 and its legacy (Nixon & Givens, 2007; Ellis, 2007; Greenland & Nunney, 2008; Edwards et al., 2016; Lee, 2019). This legacy persists even over 15 years after the section's repeal, with many staff who had taught under the legislation remaining less open to discussing LBGTQ+ 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' – by implying that 'homosexuality' can be 'promoted' (Chapman & Wright, 2008, p. 21). This implication is based on the presumption that heterosexuality cannot be promoted, since it is 'natural and organic' (Marston, 2015). Academic literature reveals that schools maintain heterosexist attitudes, with some researchers expressing worry about the detrimental impact this can have on LGBTQ+ students (Epstein, 1994; Forrest, 2000; Mehra & Braquet, 2006; Chapman & Wright, 2008; Bridge, 2010).

Current legislation

A landmark piece of legislation affecting schools is the *Equality Act 2010*, which consolidates several pieces of anti-discrimination legislation.[4] In 218 sections, the Act affords protection from harassment, discrimination, and

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[4] Notably: Equal Pay Act 1970; Sex Discrimination Act 1975; Race Relations Act 1976; Disability Discrimination Act 1995; Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003; Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2003; and Employment Equality (Age) Regulations 2006 (Equality Act 2010, para. 4).

victimisation based on any of the 'protected characteristics' of 'age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation' (*Equality Act 2010*, § 2.1). Protection extends across various areas of society, such as employment and use of public services. The part that specifically applies to schools is Part 6, Chapter 1, 'Schools', which legislates protection for LGBTQ+ students, and any other student with any of the protected characteristics, from harassment, discrimination and victimisation by 'the responsible body of a school' (§ 6.1). It is worth noting, however, that the Act itself does not protect against harassment, bullying, or victimisation by other students. Nonetheless, under the Act, a school does have a legal requirement to deal with any such incidents in the same manner as any other form of bullying (Stonewall, 2017).

Current legislation is slowly beginning to counteract the legacy of section 28 by explicitly requiring schools to teach LGBTQ+ topics. This is part of the Department of Education's new statutory requirements, which came into force in September 2020. Under these measures, RSE 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 (Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE), and Health Education in England: Statutory Guidance for Governing Bodies, Proprietors, Head Teachers, Principals, Senior Leadership Teams, Teachers, 2019).

When this present article was being written, the policy above had not been implemented by every school, so it remained unclear what impact these changes would have had on LGBTQ+ students' experiences of school. Indeed, there was no research yet published on this policy. However, it should be noted that a study carried out by 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 pay only minimal attention to LGBTQ+ 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) and Tippet (2015) argue that LGBTQ+ 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 the policy does not go far enough to ensure that schools teach a fully LGBTQ+-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 Jacob (2013) and Marston (2015), the latter calling for 'cross-curricular coverage' of LGBTQ+ content (Marston, 2015, p. 166).

School policy

Where school policy is governed by legislation (S1 School, 2020b), examining school policies may seem redundant. However, as discussed above, each school will interpret government legislation differently (Scott et al., 2020). An examination of policy 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 preventing HBT bullying or teaching LGBTQ+ history, for example. School policy objectives of this kind will no doubt have an impact on LGBTQ+ students' experiences in school.

It made sense therefore to investigate policies at my internship school that directly addressed LGBTQ+ issues and impacted LGBTQ+ students' experiences. The policies in question are: (1) the anti-bullying policy, (2) the equality information and objectives policy, (3) the RSE policy, and (4) the transgender policy.[5] Each of these is examined below:

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

2. The **equality information and objectives policy** (S1 School, 2020b) references HBT bullying as an example of a disadvantage to students that the school aims to remove or minimise. However, there are no specific equality objectives in this policy to address HBT bullying. If HBT bullying is an issue, as the policy suggests, why are there no objectives to address this? There seems to be a lack of cross-policy cohesion and support for LGBTQ+ students.

3. The **RSE policy** (S1 School, 2020c) 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 LGBTQ+ parents. However, given that this policy is based on the government RSE legislation discussed above, it suffers from the same shortcomings as the latter, and for the same reasons. That is, limiting discussions around gender and sexuality to solely RSE lessons denies students both a deeper exploration of societal influences, and the chance to challenge heteronormative attitudes across the wider curriculum.

4. The **transgender policy** (S1 School, 2020a) is dated January 2020. When this policy was 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 LGBTQ+ staff member informed me that they (the staff member) were consulted in the creation of this policy, and that they worked closely with the

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[5] The term 'transgender' is used here, as this is the terminology used by the internship school.

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 are by comparison.

Research in US schools[6] has found that anti-bullying policies that are explicitly supportive of LGBTQ+ students result in a more positive school climate for those students, suggesting that equivalent policies at my internship school may be helping LGBTQ+ students in similar ways (Szalacha, 2003; Goodenow at al., 2006; Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009). However, the mere existence of LGBTQ+-supportive policies does not necessarily guarantee concrete positive change. A 2013 study of over 5,000 LGBTQ+ secondary school students in the US found that, whilst a 'comprehensive [anti-bullying] policy' (Kosciw et al., 2013, p. 55) was linked to LGBTQ+ students having a more positive self-esteem, it did not result in less victimisation or improved academic performance for these students (Kosciw et al., 2013). Moreover, the researchers of this study did not examine the anti-bullying policies themselves, but rather asked the students about their perceptions of the policies, which suggests that an effective anti-bullying policy is one that is considered supportive in the eyes of the students. It follows, therefore, that supportive policies are the minimum a school can offer to LGBTQ+ students; that these policies are rendered meaningless where not enacted; and that policies should be designed in collaboration with students (S1 School, 2019).

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[6] Where research on LGBTQ+ issues in UK schools is lacking, US-based research can help to guide analyses 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 nations (cf. the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) Model School Anti-Bullying and Harassment Policy (GLSEN, 2019)).

Where my internship school's policies did concern LGBTQ+ issues, their focus was largely on HBT bullying – a tendency which 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 – with equally limited responses of 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 impacts 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 (Payne & Smith, 2012, 2013; Pascoe, 2013; Formby, 2015).

Researchers have also emphasised that a heavy focus on HBT bullying means that schools often overlook the impact an unsupportive home environment can have on some LGBTQ+ students, lamenting that this is often missing from schools' policies (Jones & Hillier, 2013; Formby, 2015). Schools should therefore work to integrate LGBTQ+ issues fully into the curriculum by teaching the science of sexual orientation and the legal rights of LGBTQ+ students (Jacob, 2013) and update their policies to reflect this approach, rather than only talking about LGBTQ+ 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 trans 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 trans students time out of school to attend medical appointments (Taylor, 2002).

The experiences of LGBTQ+ students

This exploration of school policy led me to question its effectiveness: that is, how LGBTQ+ students experience school life under these policies. I looked at both national and regional data on HBT bullying:

- A 2017 Stonewall study of 3,713 LGBTQ+ 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); however, it is unlikely that this difference is due to there being a more accepting environment for trans students, as only 14% of respondents believed an openly trans 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 percentage of trans 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 trans (Government Equalities Office, 2018)).

The negative school environment that bullying creates has a detrimental impact on young people's attendance and engagement with education (Rivers, 2011; Jones & Hillier, 2013). 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 (Kosciw et al., 2013; Formby, 2014). It also 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 trans 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 LGBTQ+ students have an increased risk of substance abuse, self-harm, depression, and suicide (Savin-Williams, 1994; McNamee et al., 2008; Birkett et al., 2009; Robinson & Espelage, 2011).

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 bullying. 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 LGBTQ+ students have reported that teachers intervened during an HBT bullying incident (Bradlow et al., 2017). This low percentage may result from 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); and challenging this is the main way in which schools aim to reduce HBT bullying. However, if the incident does not involve language that teachers are trained to identify as homophobic, or if teachers do not know that the student being offended is LGBTQ+, 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. Research has found that 86% of LGBTQ+ 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, it has been found that the majority of students using such language are not themselves homophobic, and that it is also part of LGBTQ+ students' vernacular (Marston, 2015; White et al., 2018). By simply only labelling such language

as 'homophobic' and adopting a zero-tolerance approach, it is likely that schools will fail to change attitudes or understand their students' worldviews (Formby, 2013; Marston, 2015; Monk, 2011; White et al., 2018).

Schools' failure to understand their LGBTQ+ students has been a prevalent issue for some time. Jones and Clarke's study (2007) showed that schools were unsure as to how they should respond to the needs of their LGB students, particularly those who were openly 'out'. Marston (2015) reports that schools often approach external agencies to obtain more information when their LGBTQ+ support systems are seen as too youth-led. This lack of knowledge and understanding among staff is manifested in LGBTQ+ students' use of the internet as an information resource: 53% of LGBTQ+ students are unable to discuss being LGBTQ+ 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 trans young people, when the internet was still in infancy. Today, 96% of LGBTQ+ 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 LGBTQ+ topics can readily stumble upon false information without their 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 LGBTQ+ issues.

It is important to remember, however, that LGBTQ+ is not a monolith; a negative school experience will not be universally shared. For example, in a study of 15 bisexual male sixth form students (ages 16-18) from across the UK, almost all participants reported positive experiences throughout their years in secondary school and in sixth form; two reported negative experiences in secondary school, but these ceased to be after the students had left for sixth form (Morris et al., 2014). A similar study conducted at a further education college in South East England also presents a positive experience. Interviews were conducted with 15 students (ages 16-22) and

11 staff who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or 'heterosexual ally'; all participants reported positive experiences, including a lack of homophobia and high levels of LGB visibility (White et al., 2018).

The experiences of the participants in these studies could differ from those of the participants in other studies discussed above, principally because of the age difference between the participants.

Recommendations for schools

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

1. First, the most effective action a school can take is to set up an LGBTQ+ support group (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 LGBTQ+ students and, by extension, rates of HBT bullying (Kosciw et al., 2010; Toomey et al., 2011). A support group can also lead to increasing LGBTQ+ students' engagement in education, with improved attendance and academic attainment (Goodenow et al., 2006; Jacob, 2013). At the same time, it is recognised that having a support group may require students to be openly out at school, which can be difficult for some (Bradlow et al., 2017). Therefore, school as a whole needs to be a safe space for LGBTQ+ students; simply having a support group is not enough, as argued in further recommendations outlined below.

2. Secondly, it is imperative that schools create a curriculum that is fully inclusive of LGBTQ+ history, rights, and activism (Linville, 2004; O'Leary, 2005) and normalises discussion of LGBTQ+ issues in all subjects (Jones & Clarke, 2007; Jacob, 2013; Kosciw et al., 2013; Formby, 2014; Marston, 2015; Bradlow et al., 2017). The curriculum should also include RSE that encompasses LGBTQ+ relationships and families and provides information on sexual health for same-sex

couples (Jones, 2011; Marston, 2015; Bradlow et al., 2017; Formby & Donovan, 2020; Scott et al., 2020).

3. Furthermore, school libraries should provide information on a range of LGBTQ+ topics (Walker & Bates, 2016; Bradlow et al., 2017). These topics include: coming out (Norman, 1999; Linville, 2004; Mehra & Braquet, 2006; Alexander & Miselis, 2007); self-acceptance (Taylor, 2002; O'Leary, 2005); and both real and fictional stories with LGBTQ+ characters (Clyde & Lobban, 2001; Taylor, 2002; Levithan, 2004; Linville, 2004).

4. Finally, schools should provide staff with comprehensive training in sexuality and gender so that they can offer support to LGBTQ+ 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 LGBTQ+ students (Greenland & Nunney, 2008; Kosciw et al., 2013; Marston, 2015; Bradlow et al., 2017). A supportive staff body should also include a counselling team trained to deal with the struggles that LGBTQ+ students can face, and openly LGBTQ+ members of staff who can act as positive role models for students. The presence of counsellors and positive role models increases students' self-acceptance and improves their mental health (Guasp, 2014; Edwards et al., 2016; Bradlow et al., 2017).

These four recommendations could be readily applied to my internship school. The school would benefit from having an LGBTQ+ support group run by both students and staff; this approach to 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 LGBTQ+ issues, including, for example: the science of sexuality and gender; how to support LGBTQ+ students with unstable home lives; a 'dos and don'ts' list of what to say and what not to say when a student comes out, especially in the case of trans students; and how to combat HBT bullying. Subject curricula could be broadened to include more LGBTQ+ topics with teaching on LGBTQ+ figures in history, texts

with LGBTQ+ characters in English literature, and books with explicit LGBTQ+ themes made available in the library. Additionally, given that the school's anti-bullying policy is due for review, it would be wise, if not essential, to invite a diverse group of LGBTQ+ students to take part in school policy discussions and contribute ideas to making policy more inclusive of LGBTQ+ students and other minorities.

Conclusion

LGBTQ+ 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 LGBTQ+ people and granting them more rights and visibility, but the better treatment these provisions now guarantee is still far from ideal. LGBTQ+ people continue to face homophobia and transphobia from strangers, from their peers, and sometimes even from their own families (Bradlow et al., 2017). These LGBTQ+-phobic voices can cause great psychological damage to the people they target. While LGBTQ+ adults may eventually develop the ability to withstand this discrimination, the harrowing impact of these behaviours on young LGBTQ+ teenagers cannot be ignored. It is therefore crucial for LGBTQ+ 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-LGBTQ+ 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 LGBTQ+ students strong support and care, by establishing LGBTQ+ support groups that help students build a sense of community; presenting positive LGBTQ+ role models; and offering counselling for students in need. Schools should also aim to include LGBTQ+-inclusive curricula in every subject; provide LGBTQ+ materials in the library; and offer school staff training in how to deal confidently with HBT bullying and other forms of discrimination.

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