Negotiations on LGBTQ inclusive education in primary schools serving faith communities in England, UK

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AC is the researcher and author.

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Abstract

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This article draws on one-to-one interviews with teachers and focus group interviews with children aged six to eleven in four elementary schools serving faith communities in England, UK, in relation to a programme of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer)-inclusive education. UK law requires schools to advance equality of opportunity and to facilitate understanding and good relations between a range of people, including on the basis of race, disability, religion, sexual orientation, and gender identity. There is scant literature on LGBTQ-inclusive education in this context, but the data in this article suggests that the assumption that religious parents will unequivocally be against the idea of LGBTQ-inclusive education in primary school may not be entirely correct. Children from faith communities are shown to be capable of respectful, critical and creative discussions about the complex ideas and apparent contradictions which arise. They talk about hypothetical coming-out strategies, how they would deal with having an LGBTQ friend, and their conversations at home about these issues. Parent-teacher exchanges demonstrate how schools can successfully manage parental consultation, and how they ultimately draw on anti-bullying approaches, broad equalities legislation, and religious concepts of neighbourly love to deliver LGBTQ-inclusive education in schools serving faith communities.

Contribution to the field

This article addresses how parents and children in schools serving faith communities experience LGBTQ-inclusive education. It draws on one-to-one interviews with teachers and focus group interviews with children aged six to eleven in four elementary schools. UK law requires schools to advance equality of opportunity and to facilitate understanding and good relations between a range of people, including on the basis of race, disability, religion, sexual orientation, and gender identity. There is scant literature on LGBTQ-inclusive education in the context of a. schools for children under 11 and b. schools serving faith communities, especially those which are not serving mainly Catholic families. The data in this article fills that gap, and suggests that the assumption that religious parents will unequivocally be against the idea of LGBTQ-inclusive education in primary school may not be entirely correct. It also adds the understanding that children from faith communities are capable of respectful, critical and creative discussions about the complex ideas and apparent contradictions which arise in this field.

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Negotiations on LGBTQ inclusive education in primary schools serving faith communities in England, UK

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1. Introduction

Drawing on interview and focus group data, this article outlines the reactions of children of faith communities to a program of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer)-inclusive education delivered within four primary (elementary) schools across England, UK. The UK’s Equality Act 2010 stipulates a ‘public sector equality duty’ (PSED), which requires state funded organisations such as schools to ‘advance equality of opportunity’ and to ‘facilitate understanding and good relations’ between those who share protected characteristics, and those who do not (Vickers 2011). The 2010 law consolidated the previously-covered protected characteristics of sex, race and disability under one Act, and added other characteristics, including religion or belief, sexual orientation, and gender ‘reassignment’ (which includes those who take a step towards changing their gender, such as regards their name, pronoun, or clothing).

In the twelve months preceding the writing of this article there was a series of well-publicised parent protests against LGBTQ-inclusive education, with people waving banners and shouting slogans for several weeks outside a small number of primary schools serving faith communities (Mainly Muslim communities) in England (Parveen 2019). These incidents feed into a perception that religion and LGBTQ identified people are not often easily aligned, especially in schools (Farrelly et al 2017; Newman et al 2018). Children are customarily viewed as innocent beings, with any proposed mention of same-sex relationships or transgender identities often leading to a sense of moral panic or lack of knowledge in the fields of both education (Neary et al 2018; Bochicchio 2019) and research (Robinson and Davies 2014). Schools fear parental backlash if they mention LGBTQ people or issues (Martino and Cumming-Potvin 2016; Farrelly et al 2017), and consultation with religious parents about this work is perceived as potentially unmanageable (Robinson and Davies 2014; Manfredi et al 2018; Holmwood 2019). At the same time, the UK Department for Education’s (2019) new Relationships and Sex Education statutory guidance emerged in 2019, and requires just that. However, previous projects have demonstrated that it is possible to successfully deliver and research LGBTQ inclusive education in schools serving faith communities (Formby 2015; DePalma and Atkinson 2009). Elementary school aged children have been shown to be capable of constructive conversations on these issues, and parents can also be collaborative (DePalma and Atkinson 2009; Robinson and Davies 2014; Barozzi and Ojeda 2014), drawing on their faith to find positive reasons for an inclusive approach to education (Formby 2015).

Themes emerging from the data reported in this article included teachers’ experiences and pedagogical approaches relating to delivering the program (Redacted 2019). The scope of this
paper is limited to a subset of the school sites visited for the larger project, more specifically
to how LGBTQ-inclusive education was experienced by families living in faith communities.
Parents were not interviewed, but in the data they are mentioned in discussions with children
and teachers.

1.1 A note on language

This article uses the acronym ‘LGBTQ’ as a broad umbrella term, with the ‘Q for queer’
f功能 as an inclusive umbrella term for nonbinary or genderfluid people; or anyone
who is not cisgender, on the gender or sex binary (including intersex people), and/or
heterosexual (Love and Tosolt 2013). The program of inclusive education discussed in this
paper did involve materials which covered the range of LGBTQ identities, but in their focus
groups children usually referred to people being ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’ or ‘transgender’ (rarely
‘bisexual’ or ‘queer’), so those words will be repeated where they were used specifically.

‘Schools serving faith communities’ in England, UK refers to a range of local government
(local authority)-run community schools and charity or federation-run ‘free’ schools and
academies. It includes ‘faith schools’, which in England serve mostly Catholic children;
Church schools, run by the Church of England, which are community schools serving a range
of children of many faiths and none (Taylor and Cuthbert 2019); and secular schools, which
may also serve children from a number of local religious communities. ‘Primary schools’ in
England serve children aged four to eleven. Where the literature uses other terms such as ‘K-5’
or ‘elementary schools’, this paper will adopt that language as appropriate.

2. Methodology

This article draws on one-to-one interviews with teachers and focus group interviews with
children aged six to eleven in four primary schools serving faith communities in England,
UK. Both teachers and children reported on their conversations with parents. The period of
data collection spans a year in which all four schools engaged in an LGBTQ-inclusive
education program delivered by a specialist education charity. The program consisted of
whole-staff training; a policy and curriculum equalities audit and updating process;
community celebrations, such as rainbow baking competitions; and the development of an
inclusive environment, such as Pride posters and rainbow reading corners. The programme
provides participating schools with a curated set of books appropriate for each age range; a
set of lesson plans, songs and activities; and guidance for embedding people with the range of
protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 (including disability, sexual orientation,
faith and age) across the curriculum in unobtrusive ways. The programme is shared with
parents in whatever way each school deems appropriate, and this ranges from a newsletter
item to parent-teacher meetings and discussions at the school gate. The merits of these
approaches are discussed in the findings section, below. One set of interviews and focus
groups were conducted at the beginning, before the program had been embedded. The second
set was collected at the same schools, at the end of the academic year. The data presented
here is a subset of a larger project on LGBTQ parented families and schools (Redacted and
Redacted 2018). Ethics approval was obtained for the project, and followed British
Educational Research Association guidelines. Ethical consideration was given to issues of
confidentiality and anonymity, sensitivity, and informed consent. The methodology involved
allowing children to raise their own questions to ensure that they steered the interview topics
(see this process explained in more detail below).
The schools discussed in this paper were situated in a variety of urban areas across England, but all four served communities where a majority of the families were from faith communities. These schools provided education to children from a wide range of linguistic and ethnic backgrounds living in economically deprived areas. They supported a high proportion of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SENDs). Many of the families attending these schools had experienced Islamophobia and racism generated by media reporting of current events relating to immigration, new limits to freedom of movement, and the global refugee crises.

All identifying details, including children’s names, have been changed for reasons of confidentiality. The school pseudonyms and faith community characteristics were as follows:

Holly School: A Church of England school in a large Northern city, serving a mixed group of Pakistani-British Muslim; African-British and Caribbean-British Christian (often Catholic, Evangelist and Pentecostalist) and White British Anglican Christian students.

Cherry School: An urban secular school in a very deprived area in the South East of England serving almost exclusively British Bengali Muslim students.

Poppy School: A Southern England urban secular school serving students who are British African (often Nigerian) and British Caribbean Christian (often Evangelist and Pentecostalist); White British of no religion; Catholic Eastern European; Bengali British and British Somali Muslim; and some Hindu students.

Iris School: In the same federation as Poppy School, on a nearby street and serving a similar population.

Schools were selected because they were part of the LGBTQ inclusive education programme. The teachers and other staff interviewed were those who were leading on the programme at each school. Across the four schools, six staff members were interviewed, including senior managers (deputy principals) and teaching assistants (TAs). All were cisgender. One identified as a lesbian, and one as bisexual; the others did not mention sexual orientation. In terms of religion, one was Hindu, two were Catholic, and three had no religion. Informed consent was obtained. Interview schedules for school employees involved broad and semi-structured sets of questions, asking generally about how they experienced the LGBTQ-inclusive education program within their specific school context, and moving later to discussing LGBTQ parented families. As a deliberately included participant-led feature of the interview protocol, respondents were also asked what questions we ‘should have asked’; teachers and TAs were then asked to answer their own questions. This is where the issue of serving a faith community first arose: common questions they suggested were: ‘what are teachers anxious about in terms of delivering this program?’ and ‘how do teachers talk to religious parents about this?’ The frequency with which these questions arose led to the focus of this paper.

In order to support a collaborative relationship with the schools, student focus group participants were selected by the lead teacher on the LGBTQ-inclusive education program in each school. Some teachers selected students perceived as particularly articulate; others sought to provide a good cross-section of faith, age, gender, ability and ethnicity in the focus group members. Twenty-four students participated across the four focus group discussions. The students in the focus groups ranged from Year 2 (aged six to seven) to Year 6 (aged ten to eleven) and consisted of a relatively even mix of genders. Students’ religions are noted in

This is a provisional file, not the final typeset article
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Informed consent was achieved via a set of information sheets and forms which were explained verbally where necessary. Children took the information sheets home to their parents. No parents contacted the schools to query their child’s participation. Consent was obtained from the children and from the school in loco parentis. On signing up for the LGBTQ inclusive education programme, the school gave consent for the programme’s researcher to conduct research with the children. Gillick competency was considered (ie a case by case approach to checking the children understood what was necessary to ensure informed consent), as well as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) principle that children have the right to be heard (BERA 2011). Teachers also gave consent for themselves and for their students to participate, and were present in the room during student focus groups. The information sheets made it clear that if children did not want to participate, they could leave at any time with no repercussion. This was effective: of the eight focus groups, five started with one child leaving within the first two to three minutes, and before discussion started. Interviews and focus groups were recorded, partially to ensure the detail of the discussions was adequately captured. This also allowed for the body language and eye contact necessary to develop rapport, trust and empathy with the teachers and students. The interviews and focus groups were designed so as to offer a friendly, kind and respectful space to listen to their stories, thoughts and feelings (Leeson 2014). Focus groups were also to be appropriate because talking in groups at school was a familiar task for the children; allowed the children to offer mutual support by sharing common stories and experiences’ (Leeson 2014, p.216); and opened up a space for them to negotiate their differences of opinion (Robinson and Davies 2014). The children were provided with paper and coloured pens; they were encouraged to draw or doodle during the focus groups, partly as a way to elicit ideas, and partly as it was an activity to which they were accustomed, and one which could help to put them at their ease (Leeson 2014). It meant they did not have to use eye contact or to engage with the discussion if they did not want to.

In making the decision to talk with young children about LGBTQ inclusion, consideration was given to the idea that failing to include children’s voices on an issue which affects them was inequitable and contravened their rights (Leeson 2014; Robinson and Davies 2014). The view was taken that the children were capable and proficient in talking about the issues at hand (Robinson and Davies 2014); ‘competent co-constructors rather than objects of study’ (Leeson 2014, p.209). The approach was facilitated as a child-led discussion (Leeson 2014; Martino and Cumming-Potvin 2016). The process of listening carefully to the children’s focus group input was conducted with a commitment to ‘a high level of emotional and intellectual engagement [which]… demanded substantial empathy and concentration’ (Leeson 2014, p.215). Conducting the focus groups involved the author drawing on a skillset developed as a former teacher of children with special educational needs. The author’s additional qualification in counselling skills supported the use of the three tenets of active listening laid out by the originator of person-centred counselling, Carl Rogers (1945): unconditional positive regard; empathy; and congruence (being oneself; being genuine) in order to track and respond with care to children’s emotional states. Rogers (1945) himself advised that these frameworks for active listening could usefully be employed in qualitative research.

In order to facilitate the child-led approach, focus group protocol followed a convergent interviewing style, where ‘the flow of the interview was controlled by the child[ren]
following an initial question’ (Leeson 2014, p.210). The focus groups therefore started with a brief: ‘LGBTQ inclusive education in your school’. Once we had defined the words age-appropriately and made sure that all the students understood them, an initial question invited the children to explain what their school uniform consisted of. This allowed the children to establish themselves as experts on their institution, and served to help to rebalance the power relationship between interviewer and focus group participants (Leeson 2014). Talking about school uniform was a familiar topic, but also one which helped children to start thinking about gender in their school. Children were also asked about what they had seen in the media in TV programs and on the internet relating to LGBTQ people. This gave the children the opportunity to approach the subject matter from a familiar but third party perspective. The teachers sitting in quietly with the focus groups often said in their interviews later that they were surprised at how much children already knew from the internet, and how much more comfortable and familiar than the adults around them they were with talking about gender identity and same-sex relationships (Robinson and Davies 2014). After the introductory discussion, the children were invited to come up with their own questions for each other and for children in the other schools we would be visiting. It was of note to discover what they would voluntarily initiate as discussion topics; their questions are a form of data in themselves. For example, they asked:

- If your mum or your dad was gay, how would you feel about that?
- If you grew up and you realised you were gay, how would you tell your parents? Could you live with it, or would you just not be gay?
- What would you do if you were friends with someone who came out as a gay or lesbian or transgender person?
- If you have a faith or a religion, how would that affect telling somebody that you are gay or lesbian or transgender?

As with the teacher interviews, the frequency at which children raised issues of faith meant that it emerged as significant within the process of inductive thematic analysis (Clarke and Braun 2014). After transcription, this process was started by reading through the focus group and interview transcripts, first to get an overview, and then more slowly, grouping the teachers’ and children’s questions and responses into broad thematic sets. Themes emerged where a topic was mentioned repeatedly, and a pattern began to emerge (Braun and Clarke 2012). The process was very much driven by what emerged from the data, privileging respondent voice (Braun and Clarke 2006). Secondary and tertiary coding using NVivo revealed more nuanced subthemes. The transcripts and codes were also assessed by another experienced researcher, who gave feedback and prompted some themes to be collapsed; others to be separated and expanded into two or more themes. Themes relating to the broader LGBTQ-parented families research are discussed elsewhere (Redacted and Redacted 2018). Teacher attitudes, reactions and strategies relating to LGBTQ inclusive education in schools serving faith communities are discussed in another paper (Redacted 2019). The data in this paper relates specifically to the experiences of parents and children in relation to LGBTQ-inclusive education in schools serving faith communities.

A limitation of this study is that it has emerged within a specific context. As noted above, England, UK was at the time of writing experiencing a highly charged debate in new media about the topic. The sample size was small, so whilst the findings cannot be generalised, they do shed some light on the experiences of some school communities addressing these issues.
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Implications of these limitations are discussed in more details in the Discussion section, below.

3. Results

The subset of themes emerging from the data presented here include teachers’ reports of children’s critical thinking in the classroom; and children’s thought experiments on how they would manage a hybrid faith/LGBTQ identity; how they would respond to friends who came out; and how their religion-inflected family values might intersect with ideas of LGBTQ inclusion. Teacher interviews also offered examples of parent-teacher discussions, including on how to deal with the idea that homosexuality is viewed as a sin; whether parents should be consulted or ‘forewarned’ about the LGBTQ-inclusive education program; and how drawing on the Equality Act 2010 and religious tenets of neighborly love can form the basis of a strategic, constructive approach to working with parents.

3.1 Children of faith communities consider the place of LGBTQ people within their religion

Students in the focus groups were able to theologise creatively about how their religion might understand LGBTQ people. For example, a student at Iris School said in the focus group that a Christian could not be gay because they would ‘go to hell’. Conversely, a Catholic student suggested, ‘God made us all perfect so wouldn’t God have made transgender people as they are: transgender?’ A Muslim student responded, ‘In my religion bullying’s not ok, so if I see someone being bullied for being gay I would help them’.

3.2 Family values: children of faith communities have a range of strategies to talk with their families about LGBTQ people

The children in the focus groups conducted a range of thought experiments about how they might come out as LGBTQ within their faith community. They started their discussions by asking each other: ‘if you were gay, what would your family say about it?’; and ‘how would you tell your parents you want to marry someone of the same gender?’

3.2.1 Children’s coming out strategies: wait till they get used to it, or have a successful career

In their focus group discussions, some of the children drew on their experience to think through strategies for hypothetical coming-out situations. ‘Coming out’ refers to the experience of letting people know about one’s LGBTQ identity; it is not a one-off incident and may need to be done repeatedly over time. One idea the children had was that they might need to give their families time to get used to the idea of them marrying someone of the same gender. Aisha, a British-Bengali Muslim student in year 2 (aged six to seven) explained that she might at first be rejected, but was confident that her family would return to her side, eventually:

I feel like at first they wouldn’t like me for it, but then they are going to get used to it. They are going to think that they left their only daughter just because of that reason, so they are going to come back, so that’s what I would think.
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Victor, a Christian Pentecostalist student whose parents had come to the UK from Nigeria, felt that they would be happier if he was honest with them from the start, so that they would have a chance to get over what he predicted might be their initial heartbreak. In his dialogue his tenses changed as he slipped in and out of an imagined future scenario with his mother:

> For me, if I ever become gay I will come to my parents, tell them the truth at first and get it out the way because then it is less hard on them ... But say if you were going to like, get married ... and I tell my parents that I wanted to be gay and she said “who to”? And she said “is it a girl, and what colour is she?” And then I said “oh it’s not a girl it’s a boy”. My mum would have been heartbroken because it is more better to tell her before so like they can get used to it, so it is more or less easier. I would have thought that they say, “why didn’t you tell me in the first place because now it is hard for us to get used to you.”

Perhaps the imagined question ‘is it a girl, and what colour is she?’ indicates the extent to which Victor draws on prior experience to think through his hypothetical scenario: he places a potential partner’s gender alongside other, more familiar potential differences, like skin colour.

Like many people whose cultures lean towards arranged marriages but who wish to have more scope for choice (Ahmad 2012), Aisha felt that if she came home with a female partner, one way to gain acceptance from her family might be to present them with a successful career so that she would have a stronger platform from which to argue her case:

> I would tell them but at first I would try to make them happy. I would find something that they think I am successful in and then I would tell them that I have done this, I have done that, just let me do what I want. And then if they don’t, if they are not happy with that, then I am still going to get married to that person no matter what. Because it’s my decision, not theirs.

She perceives that developing a successful career might firstly open her parents to accepting a same-sex partner; if they fail to do so, she feels she can still rely on herself.

### 3.2.2 Children’s coming out strategies: if I just tell the truth, my family will offer unconditional love

Religious conceptions of truth infused the children’s thoughts on coming out. They saw not coming out as a form of lying, which appeared to be anathema within the faith-inflected culture of many of their families. In response to the focus group participants’ own questions about how they might tell their parents if they were LGBTQ, Ola, a Nigerian-British Christian Evangelist student in Year 4 (age eight to nine), explained:

> It says it on our wall [at home], it says “would you rather tell the truth and make someone cry, or would you rather tell a lie and make them happy?”, and my mum used to tell that to me all the time ... you could lie to make someone happy all their life, but then you know that you did the wrong thing inside and then you’re just going to make yourself feel guilty each time you lie about it, and that’s why people say “never tell a lie” because you end up feeling guilty.

Ahmed and Saima, British-Bengali Muslim students in Year 5 (ages nine to ten) agreed:

> Ahmed: If I was to tell my parents I would have to tell them straight away, because if you tell them later on, then I’ll just get into more trouble because they will say “well why didn’t you tell me before, why didn’t you tell me before?” So it is good to tell them when you have just
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become it [gay], so that they will know … if you’re not honest then later on … they will just get even more angry.

Saima: If I was to be gay or lesbian, erm, I would have to tell my parents straight away like Ahmed said. But if you, if you don’t tell them straight away they’ll obviously get angry and they will probably say “Why didn’t you tell me at first. I would be okay with it, but why didn’t you tell me at the first?!?” They want to know straight away, because parents do.

Gracey, who attended a Pentecostalist church, recognised that being LGBTQ might upset her family. She aligned this disruption with her family culture, but suggested that their unconditional familial love might override this:

I think that if the parents, because if you are saying the truth to your parents, I think that in my country, which is Nigeria, I think … they would be really angry, because … they just think it isn’t right to be gay or lesbian, it just isn’t right, and I think it’s because they don’t normally see that happen in their country … my parents they would go ballistic, but they wouldn’t really attack me or anything, they’ll calm down I guess and they’ll just, I think they would accept it because I am the oldest child in my house because I’ve got a little sister and a little brother.

Gracey predicted an argument, but her position as the oldest child seemed to give her an advantage. Aaliyah, a British-Pakistani Muslim student, made links with her religion to assert that she would always be accepted within her family regardless of LGBTQ identity:

My mum would really, she would love me for whoever I am, whatever I am, because as a Muslim we believe that it doesn’t matter who you are, what skin colour you are, your mum and your dad will be there for you from the day you were born until the day you die.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to assess whether these children were correct in their optimism, but as Formby (2015) suggests, religiosity is not an automatic bar to acceptance of LGBTQ people.

3.2.3 It’s ok to be gay, just not in my family

Some children in the focus groups were less confident about how their family and religion would view them if they came out, but suggested it might be different for other people. In the focus groups, many of the children asked each other whether it was acceptable to be Christian or Muslim and gay. Michael, a Ghanaian-British student in Year 5 (ages nine to ten), explained that whilst his mother would not want him to be disrespectful towards gay or transgender people, actually being gay was definitely not an option for him. He explained what happened after he had been sent home for using a homophobic word in the playground:

They said I’m not allowed to play on my Xbox for a month. Yeah and I had to stay in my room and not allowed to watch TV or play with any of my toys. Even though my religion is against it, my mum doesn’t mind anyone who’s around Christianity being gay, or she doesn’t mind as far as Christianity, but when someone, like if someone in our family says it she gets very serious about it.

Esther, another student from the same church, agreed: ‘I think it’s okay for other people, like friends or something to be gay, but not in my family. I wouldn't be fine with that’.
3.3 Children from faith communities would support LGBTQ friends, but would not want it for themselves

The focus group participant students also asked each other a range of questions regarding how they might respond if a friend came out. For example, one student asked: ‘What would you do if your friend came out as gay or transgender?’ Some responses demonstrated a stark difference between accepting another student, and being unable to accept an LGBTQ identity for oneself. Michael misheard the question, thinking it referred to him coming out himself:

Michael: I would literally freak out and tell the teacher … there’s no way I would allow someone to call me gay.

Esther: No, not calling you gay, he’s saying that he’s gay himself, he’s telling you he’s gay, how would you react?

Michael: Ohhh! Okay, well I’d just be like ‘okay, that’s your life’.

These children perhaps largely reflected what they thought their parents would think: that they should respect others who were LGBTQ, but not want it for themselves.

3.4 Conversations at home: ‘we don’t agree with that… [but] in our religion we treat each other with respect’

The LGBTQ inclusive education program delivered in the schools was sometimes discussed between parents and children at home. Between them, family members worked out where their boundaries were in relation to this work, and talked through the nuances of what the work implied.

Michael, mentioned above, had been disciplined at home for using a homophobic word in the playground. But when the school held a ‘rainbow bake-off’ baking competition featuring rainbow patterned cakes to celebrate LGBT History Month, his parents kept him home from school. One of the interviewed teachers explained that his mother had drawn a distinction between celebrating LGBTQ identities: ‘we don’t agree with that in our religion’- and treating others fairly: ‘in our religion we treat each other with respect’.

Another student explained how his father had initially been resistant to the school program, but had been reassured that it was not trying to ‘make him gay’. His class had been reading a book about a boy who was fluid in his gender presentation called The Boy in the Dress (Walliams 2009), and when he mentioned it at home his father had initially erupted angrily:

We had a family meeting and my brothers talked to my dad about it. When my dad knew about the Equality Act protecting us because we are Muslim as well as protecting LGBT people he was okay about it; he said school was just telling us about the people we might meet in the world.

Knowing that the LGBTQ inclusive education program was part of a broader equalities project which also applied to the family’s religion helped this father to express that he felt more comfortable.

3.5 Parent-teacher meetings: how teachers talk about an LGBTQ inclusive education program with parents from faith communities
3.5.1 Teachers empathise with parents’ fear of homosexuality as a sin

Teachers reported that some parents feared the implications of the idea that ‘being gay’ is a sin against the tenets of their religion. The teachers showed empathy about this. The lead teacher on the program at Poppy School explained how she had addressed this with one father from a Christian British-Caribbean family:

I had one parent come to me on the gate and he said, “It’s against my religion. I believe that homosexuality is a sin. That’s how I bring my son up, I don’t want him being told any different”. I said, “… it’s part of our inclusion policy, it’s part of our equality that we have to tell him … Obviously, anything that you educate your son with at home, I don’t get involved in that”. He was like, “Okay, that’s fine”. I think sometimes they just want to say. Obviously, to them, if they do feel that strongly about it I have to respect that. It’s a different culture, it’s a different religion. I think it must be really sad if you really, genuinely believed that your son would be going to hell if he was gay. That must be a fear that you have. If that’s something that you believe and then you think, “Oh goodness, they’re being corrupted by this woman”. That must be a genuine fear. I do respect that.

This teacher is othering the family’s culture and religion. At the same time, she is differentiating between home and school, reassuring the parent that the program’s reach does not go beyond the public sphere to disrupt his family’s religious framework.

3.5.2 Teachers felt that communicating with parents on an informal basis about the program was more constructive

One of the questions which teachers in the interviews often suggested was whether schools should forewarn parents about upcoming program content. The program lead teacher at Poppy School did not feel that sending letters to parents beforehand would be helpful:

I know some people in other schools go for the approach of “we’re doing this because of this, if you have any concerns …” I feel personally that’s setting yourself up to say that you’re doing something that’s not okay for the children … I just think, why?! If I had a Black history workshop I wouldn’t say “hi parents, I’m having a workshop about Black history, if you’re racist please contact me”, like I wouldn’t do that so I don’t know why I would do that for anybody else, why would I do that?!

In fact, the neighboring Iris School did initially send ‘warning’ letters to parents, and this resulted in around 30 parents requesting one to one parent-teacher meetings. In comparison, Poppy School’s lead teacher more casually mentioned the program in the newsletter as something which was going to happen alongside other features on a netball tournament and a homework club. Her approach resulted in three or four parent-teacher discussions at the school gate.

3.5.3 Private beliefs; public curriculum

Many of the teachers interviewed explained that they had to think carefully about how to balance their students’ home-based values against the work undertaken in class. A Holly School teaching assistant described her approach. Her class was reading a book called And Tango Makes Three (Richardson et al 2005), a true story about two male penguins who adopt a baby penguin at a zoo in the US:
... when kids say, “ooh, that’s not right” [that is, talking about same-sex penguin parents]… I won’t immediately jump into, “ooh no you’re wrong”. You have to be accepting, because the most important people in their lives are their parents and … it is not really healthy for them to be having this massive great big divide for them and their parents. And yes, we agree you are not going to insult people, but if they say, “oh, mum says it is wrong”, I am not going to go, “well, she is just wrong then!”, because that is their relationship that they need. I think half of it is providing another voice and so they are aware that - especially queer kids - that there is … a different option. And I think that that is just as important a step as everyone going, “yay, everything is fine”.

A Poppy School teacher took a similar approach with parents she spoke to at the school gate: … it was just “I don’t feel comfortable about you telling my son that it’s okay to be gay because that’s not what I believe”, and I just head it off at the pass, I think the best way is to not make it into an argument or I’m trying to force my views onto somebody, so I just said to this dad, I was like “no that’s fine, whatever you think, obviously as part of our ethos in the school we think that it needs to be taught to children, we’re not forcing an opinion on somebody, we’re just showing them a range of opinions like we do in RE (religious education), we show a lot of different religions, like we do with cultures, so it’s about learning about different people, it’s not to impose a belief” … and all parents have been fine with it.

3.5.4 The Equality Act 2010: no hierarchy of equality

Noting that an inclusive curriculum includes people of a range of faiths and ethnicities as well as gender identities and sexual orientations can be useful in talking directly with parents. The Holly School headteacher said that she had told many parents: ‘that’s Equality Act, this is what we do now’. The lead teacher for the program at Iris School described how these conversations with parents helped to make them feel that this work was all part of celebrating the school’s diverse community:

… we’d talked about the legislation and the reasoning behind it and the parallels with race in terms of “well actually you know, we’re a very multi-ethnic community and how would you feel if your child was in a school where they didn’t feel comfortable, where you didn’t feel comfortable and you didn’t feel recognised, where you didn’t feel that your identity was celebrated, I’m sure that you wouldn’t feel happy about that so why would you think it should be anything less than for another minority group or any other group”.

This approach - drawing on the Equality Act 2010- is part of the program’s training model, and was one used by all the schools.

3.5.5 Love of one’s neighbor: appealing to religious principles

Another method used by many of the teachers was to appeal to parents’ religious commitment to kindness to one’s neighbor. The Iris School lead teacher explained that this was an especially effective approach, and described how …one of the things I used to come back to quite a lot was “one of the main tenets of Christianity is to love and respect everybody”, I said and “that’s all we’re asking for”, I said and “if that’s what you believe in your religion then surely that’s not a difficult thing to do”.

4. Discussion
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The teachers and families described in this paper worked hard to find ways to negotiate the boundaries between home and school. Equalities law in the UK requires organisations to facilitate mutual respect in order to support individuals with different characteristics, needs and aims to flourish, as far as possible, within the frameworks they choose for their own lives, including religious frameworks (Vickers 2011). These religious frameworks vary both within and across religions, and much of England is religiously diverse, so it is difficult to generalise the impact on children’s opinions. However, tensions can arise where the aims of different groups are understood, particularly via an inflammatory media, to be mutually irreconcilable (Neary et al 2018), and there are some faith-specific themes which can be drawn out of the literature. For example, some young people see Islam as a religion whose adherents will inevitably police non-normative sexualities (Page and Yip 2012). However, as the student focus group participants recognised, in reality, groups have their own internal variety, and individuals often have intersectional identities - such as being gay or bisexual and religious (Blum 2010; Vickers 2011; Neary, Gray and O’Sullivan 2018; Taylor and Cuthbert 2019). Further, as Malik (2008) explained in a review of the upcoming Equality Act 2010, the law holds that there should be no hierarchy of rights, and although she acknowledges that private acts can have public consequences, she draws a distinction between private belief, which is not subject to the public sector equality duty (PSED), and public action, which is. The parents and teachers discussed in the Findings section, above, drew solace from this boundary (Redacted 2019). It allowed them to bridge the apparent chasm between what Blum (2010) describes as ‘private morals’, applicable to oneself, and ‘professional morals’, which are owed to the whole school community.

Teachers also reported parents who discussed the meaning of sin, and how it inflected their thinking about LGBTQ inclusive education. Love and Tosolt (2013) outline the way in which the Catholic church has addressed this in their schools by understanding the idea of acting on homosexual feelings as forbidden, but asking schools to implement anti-homophobia and anti-bullying policy. Teachers steeped in the US ‘Black Church’ and Catholic traditions have also been seen to support LGBTQ students in this way, framing their approach as ‘hating the sin rather than the sinner’ (Reed and Johnson 2010; Love and Tosolt 2013). C. Wright Mills (1959) calls on our ‘sociological imagination’ to draw our attention to the need to understand ‘private troubles’ as ‘public issues’. Research into the impact of the PSED has found that just implementing the responsibility for developing mutual understanding can result in tangible cultural change (Manfredi, Vickers and Clayton-Hathway 2018), and the conversations between parents, teachers and children included here offer examples of this unfolding process as it crosses and re-crosses into private and public arenas.

Whilst the UK’s PSED supports people of different protected characteristics, such as religion and sexual orientation, to become mutually respectful and understanding, some of the data confirms that religious culture is not always supportive of LGBTQ people (Perez-Testor et al 2010; Kuvalanka et al 2018; Langa 2015; Farrelly et al 2017; Newman et al 2018). In schools serving faith communities, there is often an expectation of invisibility at best (Callaghan and Mizzi 2015), and bullying at worst (Farrelly et al 2017). School curricula and attitudes towards non-normative gender presentations tend to be heteronormative, especially in primary schools and schools serving faith communities (DePalma and Atkinson 2009; DePalma and Jennet 2010; McCormack 2012; Berozzi and Ojeda 2014; Love and Tosolt 2015; Formby 2015; Martino and Cuming-Potvin 2016; Farrelly et al 2017; Bochicchio 2019). However, some schools serving faith communities are inclusive and supportive of LGBTQ students, and as the Catholic Holly School teaching assistant shows, above, religious school employees are not necessarily resistant to LGBTQ-inclusive pedagogies (Neary et al
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2018; Taylor and Cuthbert 2019), and teachers who know LGBTQ people are even more
likely to be inclusive (Bochicchio 2019). The children’s own comments – for example, their
range of coming-out strategies; and how they would respond to a friend who came out –
demonstrate that they are able to creatively negotiate the intersectional issues relating to
LGBTQ and religious identity.

The schools discussed here started their LGBTQ inclusion work strategically with what
might be seen as a pathologising anti-bullying discourse (Redacted 2019). However, perhaps
this can open up the idea of a more embedded form of LGBTQ-inclusive education (DePalma
For example, in their interviews, some of the teachers talked about how they explained to
parents that they are merely educating the students to be kind to people who are different to
themselves. This might be critiqued as stopping short of the idea of developing mutual
understanding and respect (Blum 2010; Vickers 2011). But ultimately, the PSED can
potentially allow organisations to work within their own local cultures and institutional
structures to embed and implement proactive equalities processes (Formby 2015; Manfredi et
al 2018). The teachers in this research knew the community they served, and tailored their
interactions accordingly.

The children in the focus groups were seen to be more equal to the philosophical and
emotional work of intersectional inclusion than may have been imagined possible by their
parents and teachers. As some of the parents’ initial school gate conversational gambits
reported by teachers demonstrated, the prospect of LGBTQ-inclusive education in primary
schools, especially those serving faith communities, can result in the spectre of moral panic
(Neary et al 2018). Children are understood in many religions (the literature mainly addresses
Catholicism) to be innocent beings who are unable to understand LGBTQ ‘issues’ (DePalma
and Jennett 2010; Allen et al 2014; Farrelly et al 2017). This can impact on researchers’
willingness to talk about issues of sexuality with children, and emerges from a confusion
between LGBTQ identity and the idea of sexual activity (Blum 2010; Robinson and Davies
2014). The resultant anxiety can usher in a culture of silence (Callaghan and Mizzi 2015;
Farrelly 2017), with many teachers claiming that there are no LGBTQ students in their
schools (Formby 2015). However, homophobic, biphobic, transphobic and heteronormative
(Formby 2015) (HBTH) language and bullying has been observed in very young children
(Swartz 2003; Solomon 2004; Knoblauch 2016). This indicates that LGBTQ-inclusive
education could fruitfully be implemented for elementary school aged children (Solomon
2004; DePalma and Jennet 2010; Farrelly et al 2017). Both teachers and children have been
found to be equal to this task: in the context of elementary schools in Spain, which largely
serve a Catholic community, teachers expressed a willingness to practice LGBTQ-inclusive
education (Berozzi and Ojeda 2014); and others have found that elementary school children
could be open and thoughtful about LGBTQ people and issues (Hackman 2002; DePalma and
Jennett 2010; Berozzi and Ojeda 2014). Confirming this, the student focus group participants
discussed in this paper were seen to be able to comprehend the idea of LGBTQ inclusion
within the culture of their faith community. For example, they decided that coming out
decisions could be informed by a faith-based focus on being truthful. They also thought of
ways to be kind to gay friends albeit whilst not imagining themselves being gay; or to
introduce a same-sex partner to the family by drawing on culturally established tactics, such
as being successful in a career before coming out. Teachers are often pleasantly surprised at
how children can hold these apparently controversial ideas in mind, and discuss them
successfully (Redacted 2019).
There is a sustained theme of a fear of parental backlash in the literature on LGBTQ-inclusive education in schools serving faith communities (DePalma and Atkinson 2009; Barozzi and Ojeda 2014; Knoblauch 2016; Martino and Cumming-Potvin 2016; Farrelly et al 2017; Redacted 2019). Faith schools and educators of faith often view the parent as the primary educator in matters of religion, sex and sexuality (Callaghan 2016), and frame any curricular or pastoral input around sex or sexuality as a safeguarding issue to be discussed with parents (Formby et al 2010). The data outlined in this paper demonstrates that teachers understand these tensions, and can work with them to reassure parents that their reach is in the public realm only. Parents such as Michael’s mother, discussed above, can sometimes pull their children out of school to avoid them receiving LGBTQ-inclusive education (Martino and Cumming-Potvin 2016). This is a particular issue where any mention of LGBTQ people is limited to relationships and sex education (RSE) (Formby et al 2010) as parents in England, UK are allowed to remove their children from RSE classes on religious grounds (Formby et al 2010; Vanderbeck and Johnson 2016). Despite this, the embedded nature of the program discussed here means that the schools were able to ensure some measure of LGBTQ inclusive education for all their students, including those who were removed from RSE.

The schools discussed in this paper found that they were able to constructively communicate with parents about the LGBTQ inclusive education programme if it was not singled out as something especially problematic. At the time of writing (2019), whether or not to consult with parents about upcoming LGBTQ content is the subject of much debate in UK media, with some parents of faith suggesting that a failure to communicate with them on this issue means that their religious rights under the Equality Act 2010 have been contravened (Parveen 2019; Holmwood 2019). Community organisers can also have a hand in parental responses to school curricula. Parents in Canadian research by Martino and Cumming-Potvin (2016) were given anti-LGBTQ leaflets to hand out at school by their local mosque. Given the hierarchy of power in organised religion (Vickers 2011), it is difficult to know whether these parents would have felt the need to protest the materials had they not been provided with these leaflets. Whilst the PSED does require schools to consult with stakeholders on equalities issues, it is unclear who is qualified to speak on behalf of a community of a particular faith, and the elusive task of identifying key stakeholders can have the effect of privileging the loudest voices (Manfredi et al 2018). The approach taken by some of the teachers discussed in this paper was to share information about the program in the same way any other piece of news would be shared, and then to wait at the school gate to field concerns on a needs-specific basis. Parents were able to raise their personal fears as part of a one-to-one conversation, and teachers drew on their resources of empathy to frame their responses in a way which paid attention to parents’ faith-based apprehensions. DePalma and Atkinson (2009) suggest that collaborative planning with parents can allay teacher and parent anxieties. However, as the Poppy School lead teacher found, above, they caution that this approach could identify LGBTQ equality as especially problematic, arguing that schools would not feel they had to ask parents for permission to discuss racism. Blum (2010) warns against offering a parent veto over school curriculum, reasoning that schools have a civic duty towards their whole community, not merely those with the majority voice. However, Barozzi and Ojeda (2014) cite research in Spain explaining that religious parents welcomed the school’s input on this topic, as they felt underprepared to talk about LGBTQ people and issues with their own children.

The study is limited by its particular context. In England, UK, there is a long-running debate around LGBTQ inclusive education in the media and in political fora (Parveen 2019). Within
this febrile media environment and as the country moved towards a hastily announced
General Election, the Department for Education (2019) released the first update in ten years
of its Relationships and Sex Education curriculum. In the guidance for this new programme
of study, to be delivered from September 2020, primary schools are required to teach
mammalian reproduction as part of the science curriculum in Year 5 (for children aged nine
and ten), but must consult with parents as to whether this is extended to mention human
reproduction in Year 6 (for ages ten and eleven). In recognition of the concerns of the wide
ranging religious communities served by UK schools, parents are allowed to withdraw their
children from lessons about human reproduction, even if it is agreed that their school should
deliver it. On the other hand, the Department for Education guidance (2019) stopped short of
requiring schools to be LGBT inclusive, only making this ‘strongly advised’. This has put
UK primary schools in a difficult position, requiring them to find ways to deliver the
curriculum in ways which are conducive with the Equality Act 2010, but without the strong
backing of a government mandate. ‘Age appropriateness’ is also subject to parent
consultation within the statutory guidance. As a consequence, the practical implications
outlined in the section below should be considered as emerging from, and useful within this
very specific context.

Another limitation was that the sample size was small, covering just a few schools. Whilst
this means that results cannot be generalised, they do however offer some useful areas to
investigate further.

5. Conclusion and practical implications

There are a range of practical implications emerging from this research. Firstly, it is useful
for teachers to know that very young children have been known to use homophobic and
transphobic language, when others of the same age with same-sex parented or transgender
parent-headed families could be within earshot, so work in this area should ideally start in the
early years (Solomon 2004; DePalma and Jennet 2010; Farrelly et al 2017). In fact, when
discussions about LGBTQ people do arise in primary schools, children have shown
themselves to be very respectful and empathic, and are often already more knowledgeable
than parents and teachers might have assumed (Hackman 2002; DePalma and Jennett 2010;
Berozzi and Ojeda 2014; Redacted and Redacted 2018; Redacted 2019). The data in this
paper also shows that children from faith communities are able to hold in mind both their
cultural, family or religious teachings on LGBTQ relationships and identities, and the idea
that they should be respectful towards others who are not like themselves.

Secondly, schools could reassure parents that private belief is not subject to law - parents are
free to tell their children what they believe at home (Formby et al 2010). It might also be
useful to clarify with parents that LGBTQ inclusive education is not about sex, or intended to
form children’s own identities, but about the inclusion of people with a range of relationships
and identities. For example, in line with recent UK government guidance on inclusive
Relationships and Sex Education (Department for Education 2019), early years curricula in
the UK could include children with two mothers within a larger conversation about different
family structures, including foster families and children living with grandparents- and the
idea that children should learn to treat others with respect, even if their beliefs and lives are
different.

Consultation with parents should be broad, drawing in a large range of stakeholders to avoid
relying on one voice to speak for a community (Manfredi et al 2018). The process should
include parents’ voices meaningfully (DePalma and Atkinson 2009) within the guidelines
provided by the government- for example, with attention given to balancing the protected characteristics in the Public Sector Equality Duty outlined in the Equality Act 2010. A useful approach to this is to talk about the need to support all children who are experiencing bullying, illustrating the needs to equally respond to the needs of, for example, a child bullied for wearing a hijab and child targeted for having same-sex parents.

Finally, schools might benefit from working with parents of faith on ideas rooted in religious tenets (Reed and Johnson 2010; Love and Tosolt 2013), such as the idea that one can ‘love the sinner’ rather than the action disapproved of. Another useful principle is that of ‘loving your neighbour’, and the notion that no religion would encourage bullying behaviour, drawing on the concept that ‘God’ is often seen as the only being allowed to pass judgment on people. In line with these ideas, schools serving faith communities might find it fruitful to start with an anti-bullying approach (DePalma and Atkinson 2009; Formby 2015; Martino and Cumming-Potvin 2016; Farrell et al 2017; Redacted 2019), moving later to embed and implement more proactive, ‘usualising’ equalities processes (Formby 2015; Redacted and Redacted 2018; Manfredi et al 2018).

There is scant literature on parent and child conceptions of this work, but the data in this article suggests that the assumption that parents of faith will unequivocally be against the idea of LGBTQ-inclusive education in primary schools may not be entirely correct. Most of the children and parents in the program from families where faith is important were inclusive of, accepting and respectful towards people that are LGBTQ in their conversations. The children in the focus groups initiated their own thought experiments and were agile, creative thinkers: their ability to hold and work with intersecting ideas represents a real source of hope.

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In review