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Views and experiences of teachers working with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender pupils with SEND

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary discourse, sexuality is being presented as something fluid, with research persisting in framing sexuality as negotiable to some extent. This way of examining sexuality is problematic because as one discovers how identity changes, a certain terminology, such as 'trend' or 'phase' becomes prominent giving the illusion Lesbian Gay Bisexual Trans + (LGBT+) pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) are easily influenced and too immature to form LGBT+ identities because of their SEND. Educators viewing sexuality and gender identity as a phase/trend can result in providing limited support due to the misconception that information about LGBT+ concepts is unimportant for pupils with SEND or that one can simply stop being LGBT+. This paper discusses Special Educational Needs (SEN) teachers' views involving their pupils' ways of exploring their LGBT+ identities and examines how this links to the misconception of their sexuality and gender as a phase/a trend due to their SEND. The paper is framed by intersectionality which allows for a detailed analysis of how identities interact when used as an analytic tool. The paper calls for more nuanced thinking of sexuality and gender in the lives of LGBT+ pupils with SEND, which will help to decrease inequality.

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Introduction

During my literature review, I have come across a gap in research involving the voices of SEN practitioners in relation to their views on the gender identity and sexual orientation of LGBT+ pupils with SEND. The SEND Code of Practice (2015) is statutory guidance for organizations in the United Kingdom (UK) supporting/working with children and young people with SEND which clarifies that a child with SEN is a child who has a learning difficulty or disability which makes special educational

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provision necessary for them. Research about the education of disabled LGBT+ pupils and about LGBT+ identities of children and young people with SEND is limited and insufficient in terms of involving disabled LGBT+ youth's views (Morgan et al., 2011; Arrieta & Palladino, 2015; Toft et al., 2020; Toft et al., 2019; Miller et al., 2019). Information and research about the LGBT+/SEND intersection have been insubstantial (See for example: Bernert et al., 2012; Whitney & Whitney, 2006; Eliason, Martinson, and Carabez, 2015; Elderton et al. 2014; Goodley, 2013; Liddiard, 2014; McRuer, 2003; McRuer & Mollow, 2012; Slater, 2015; Toft et al., 2019). In addition to this, approximately 17% of 'same-sex attracted young people are disabled' (Hillier et al., 2010, cited in Toft et al., 2019, p.158) and autistic people might be three times more likely to be transgender (Warrier et al., 2020).

As for the UK population, results from the 2020-2021 Family Resources Survey (GOV.UK, 2022) show that 22% of citizens are disabled. Some of the latest UK population data suggests that between 15-20% of UK citizens are neurodivergent (ND) and it has been estimated that 3.1% of the UK population aged 16 and over identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual (Office for National Statistics, 2020). For LGBT+ children and young people with SEND who are trying to feel accepted, it is crucial to get a sense of their identity and what that means in the context of the society in general. This is important for disabled LGBT+ people especially as they face layered stigma (Maroney & McGinley, 2020). For example, the stigma against transgender people is also spread in schools and it is even bigger when it comes to gender-nonconforming pupils, especially effeminate boys (Erickson-Schroth & Jacobs, 2017).

LGBT+ disabled people also have to face the general public's marginalization based on misconceptions regarding their sexuality, the most frequent of which are they cannot control their sexual behavior or that they are non-sexual, incapable or uninterested in sex or relationships (Banim et al., 1997; Pebdani & Tashjian, 2022; Toft et al., 2019; Yule, Brotto & Gorzalka, 2014). There is also the "myth of asexuality" in disability communities, social assumptions that all disabled people are asexual whether they so self-identify or not (Cuthbert, 2017; Kim, 2011; Milligan & Neufeldt, 2001). To avoid any confusion between the two terms it is important to explain the term 'asexual' as absence of sexual attraction/ desires for sexual activity and research shows that it may be best thought about as a sexual orientation (Bogaert, 2004; Yule et al., 2014; Catri, 2021). This complexity around various misconceptions and the "correct" usage of identity-related terms simply illustrates the continued battle for clarity and understanding of the LGBT+ disabled identities within our wider society, including the educational system.

Identities

Given the largely negative portrayal of disabled and LGBT+ people by the media (Solomon & Kurtz-Costes, 2018; Thomasson, 2019), practitioners have a key role in supporting LGBT+ pupils with SEND by creating a safe school environment to decrease the risk of developing mental health issues for this category of pupils (Russell et al., 2009; Toft & Franklin, 2020). This is further reinforced by the fact that there are various LBGT+/SEND-related misconceptions, such as seeing sexuality and gender identity as just a phase or some sort of trend when it comes to young people with SEND (Toft et al., 2020). Many are infantilized in the area of sexuality or sheltered from it (Bonnie, 2014; Gill, 2015; Liddiard, 2017; Toft et al., 2019). Periods of their childhood are extended by their families (Littig et al., 2012; Rogers, 2010) despite the fact that adolescence is generally thought of as a period of exploration (Freitas, 2008). Not enabling them to explore their sexuality and gender identity can lead to disabled youth exploring them in secret or unsafely (Toft et al., 2019). Other types of misjudgement include anti-trans activists spreading claims that people with disabilities, especially autistic youth, are being ‘tricked’ into identifying as transgender (Anderson, 2022). This can lead to limited or non-existent access to support for the LGBT+/SEND category of pupils due to the misconception that having an LGBT+ identity is irrelevant to them or that they can simply grow out of the LGBT+ “phase” (Toft et al., 2020). Therefore, this study’s aim is to explore how SEN practitioners’ views compare to wider society’s misconception of LGBT+ disabled children and young people’s sexuality and gender as a phase or a trend due to their SEND.

Through the lens of intersectionality, this paper outlines the opinions and lived experiences of SEN practitioners working with pupils with SEND who identify as LGBT+, including children with Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA). PDA is a sub-type of autism which is specifically linked to extreme avoidance of demands (Stuart et al., 2020). Intersectionality is the analytic tool for this study as I think it can help us comprehend the participants’ complex responses regarding their work experience with pupils with the LGBT+/SEND intersection who also face various social inequalities. Intersectionality has become the prevalent approach to conceptualizing the link between frameworks of marginalization which build our various identities and our place in society according to the hierarchical system of privilege and power (Carastathis, 2014). The term intersectionality was first coined by the feminist scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw around the early 1990s to explain the oppression of African-American women, in particular looking at the intersection of sex and race (Lutz et al., 2016). The intersectionality discussed in this article is the LGBT+ disabled pupil (or ‘pupil with SEND’ - a term often used within the UK educational

system) and how society continues to build systemic barriers, such as the continuation of the idea that LGBT+ identities are a direct result of LGBT+ ideas being easily 'pushed' onto young, disabled people due to being viewed as too immature to be LGBT+ (Toft et al., 2019).

The article begins with a brief overview of the existing literature exploring the concept of non-heterosexual sexualities and gender identities as a trend or a phase. This will then be followed by an explanation of the methods both in terms of the research conducted and also, the analytic process regarding the key findings linked to the LGBT+/SEND intersection. This is then followed by a section that presents several key themes from the interview data which also highlight the intersection of age, sexuality, gender identity and disability. The first key theme is that some practitioners can view pupils with SEND as too impressionable with regard to LGBT+ information. The second key theme is that some SEN practitioners might worry about frightening or confusing pupils when discussing LGBT+ concepts. The third key theme is linked to ignoring and devaluing LGBT+ voices of SEN pupils. The analysis narrative emerging from these three key themes is then contextualized in relation to the existing literature around the idea of the phase/trend and highlights why this is potentially harmful to LGBT+ pupils with SEND. The article concludes with a call to think of gender identity and sexuality in terms of life paths rather than a trend or a phase.

LGBT+ 'phases' and 'trends'

There is a long-lasting preconception with regard to individuals with disabilities that assumes they are not mature enough to understand their own sexuality or gender identity. For example, autistic individuals, especially autistic females, are more likely to experience greater diversity in terms of sexuality (Bush et al., 2020; Pecora et al., 2019). Yet despite this evidence, there is a certain continuity to the idea that having an LGBT+ identity is either a part of going through a phase or is part of following a trend for those who have disabilities (Aramburu Alegría, 2018; Toft et al., 2020). This way of thinking also involves asexual (not experiencing sexual attraction) disabled people (Decker, 2015) despite the fact that ND people are more likely to identify as asexual compared to non-autistic people (Bush et al., 2020; Weir et al., 2021). This evidence clearly shows that the perpetuation of the idea of disabled children and young people following LGBT+ trends or going through LGBT+ phases is pointless. It could be argued that this could only lead to encouraging heterosexist and homophobic attitudes. Furthermore, seeing homosexuality as inferior to (unquestioned) heterosexuality could encourage the binary logic of 'othering' those with non-normative sexualities (Rothmann & Simmonds, 2015). This would

be especially dangerous for socio-political institutions, such as schools which often deal with high levels of LGBT - based bullying (Goodboy & Martin, 2018; Gower et al., 2018; Kosciw et al., 2012; Russell et al., 2011).

The limited existing literature on the disabled LGBT+ identities of young people often includes the views of practitioners working with young people with intellectual disabilities or disabled students at college age (Miller et al., 2019; Mintz, 2018; Stoffelen et al., 2013) rather than the voices of SEN practitioners teaching children and young people of school age. Some of the early research involving SEN practitioners highlights that SEN teachers believe that teaching about sexuality should be quite limited and only directed to those learners who are considered “educable” (Howard-Barr et al., 2005). According to the study of Morgan et al. (2011), SEN professionals must acknowledge the existence of sexuality as an important aspect of disabled LGBT+ teenagers’ identities. This conclusion is similar to the one found in another international study which highlights the need for preservice teacher programs addressing LGBT issues directly in order to “produce” truly inclusive SEN educators (Dykes, 2010). This is important considering structural barriers within institutions can make disabled pupils more vulnerable (Hollomotz, 2011) and classify gender identity and sexuality as a phase/a trend that doubts one’s identity (Toft et al., 2020).

Research shows that some autistic children see gender as something that is not so important in the context of their lived experiences as they grow and develop (Jack, 2012). In other words, many autistic children and young people do not see gender as something significant with regard to the development of their personal identity. They often think of themselves as gender-neutral and the female autistic population experience gender nonconformity more than autistic males (Cooper et al., 2018). Research focuses more on the intersection of disability and sexuality rather than the intersection concerning disability and gender when it comes to disabled LGBT+ identities (Bedard et al., 2010; Mulcahy et al., 2022). One area that needs more attention in terms of research is the intersection of gender, PDA and childhood. For PDA children, struggling with demands made by others also includes gendered demands (Moore, 2020). Furthermore, many autistic children and young people do not acknowledge gender as a binary construct and this can affect the ways in which they perceive their gender development. Many autistic people adopt gender-fluid attitudes (George & Stokes, 2018), thus they are more open to exploring their gender identity which can sometimes lead to extended periods of time. This coupled with misconceptions about disabled sexual lives (being viewed as non-sexual, childlike and too immature to have views on sexuality) can lead to the continuation of the idea of the phase/trend. The notion of thinking of sexuality and gender as a phase or a trend, I argue, is

reinforced by the responses of this study's participants when it comes to commenting on wider society's misconceptions regarding disabled pupils' LGBT+ identities.

The notion of sexuality being seen as a phase is not accepted by Diamond and colleagues who argue that sexual orientation is not fixed and therefore, one can change their sexual orientation at a later stage in life (Diamond & Butterworth, 2008; Diamond et al., 2017). No one seems to question attraction as a phase despite the fact that attraction (and relationships) can change with time (Huston & Levinger, 1978; Savin-Williams et al., 2012). Sexual orientation identities can change with time (Savin-Williams et al., 2012), and yet sexuality can be seen as a phase by some. Another study about the 'phase' narrative highlights the same findings of Diamond's studies and argues that the continuation of the 'phase story' is damaging to the wellbeing of disabled LGBT+ youth as it confirms the validity of misconceptions about their sexuality/gender identity which include being incapable of being LGBT+ due to their disabilities (Toft et al., 2020).

Methods

This article includes data collected *via* one-to-one online interviews with eight participants from England (UK), who approached me to take part in this study based on my 'call for participants' *via* social media. I had a target participant population in mind as the criteria involved being a former/current SEN practitioner with an experience of working with LGBT+ children and young people with SEND. The aim was to only interview SEN practitioners (not mainstream school staff) as these are educators specifically trained to work with children and young people with SEND. Yet there is a gap in the existing literature involving their voices despite having a great deal of SEND-related knowledge gained through their practice and training.

The specific, interviewed participants are a mixture of SEN teachers and SEN private tutors, who were selected in this way because of limited choice and parameters on my part. As when working with schools, the researcher's choice is really limited and must be aligned with what is possible in busy work environments. Teachers' busy workload and time constraints often result in the researcher having to be flexible according to the needs of the teachers (Walshe & Law, 2024). According to Clark (2008, cited in Walshe & Law, 2024, p.1), 'There are some professional groups for whom gaining access is increasingly difficult', including teachers. Although, it may seem the study was limited in terms of the number of participants, I was purposely aiming for a smaller number of participants. This is because the issues I am exploring are complex and often

misunderstood. Therefore, it is important to conduct this type of data collection in depth and a small number of participants is therefore, appropriate.

Two of these participants held leadership roles in SEN schools in the past. Three of the participants acquired some of their teaching experience in mainstream schools prior to joining SEN schools. One participant identifies as a member of the LGBT+ community and four have a disability. Seven of them have worked with LGBT+ children and young people as part of their job. One of them interacts with LGBT+ young people outside of a school-based setting. Two of the participants have LGBT+ children themselves. These participants have worked with LGBT+ children and young people with autism, PDA, dyslexia, communication difficulties and mental health needs and the pupils' age was between 7 and 16.

All data were analyzed thematically, adopting a flexible approach of looking for similarities across the data from the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This method fitted well with this study's aim of highlighting the voices of the participants as the paper is mainly based on their views, feelings and experiences. Thematic analysis offers a highly flexible technique that can be tailored to meet the requirements of various studies due to its theoretical freedom, offering a complicated yet complete explanation of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; King, 2004). I have utilized the six phase-style of thematic analysis, including generating codes and themes by hand as it was a small data set (8 participants). However, as each interview was at least 90 min long - as a result, the data was very detailed and reflective. The method was appropriate for this study as it allowed me to look for key similarities as well as key differences in the participants' responses to determine the main themes emerging from the data. We can only, of course, speak about the experiences/views of the participants. However, the depth of the data can add to understandings of the challenges highlighted in the literature.

Each participant was de-briefed prior to the start of the interview and reminded of the fact that their identity was going to be protected. Their line managers were not notified of their participation and all names used in this study are fictitious. This knowledge enabled them to feel at ease with regard to how much information they wanted to share. All participants share a good understanding of the area of SEND based on their extensive practice. The data-collection approach was collaborative. The questioning format started with open questions which enabled them to raise difficult issues if they felt like it. Then the questioning proceeded to semi-structured questions, largely based on the existing literature in relation to the misconceptions around the LGBT+SEND intersection. I invited participants to open up the discussion and take it in the direction they were comfortable with. They were from seven different SEN settings

(only two happened to be from the same school) and this enabled me to explore their responses from different angles as none of them worked with the same pupils.

I also informed them I held no preexisting beliefs about their roles. I was aware that being an insider to the SEN teaching profession could potentially mean having difficulties questioning certain practices (Gregory & Ruby, 2011). There was also the possibility of being viewed by the participants as someone who would criticize rather than support (ibid). I had a discussion with all of the participants at the start of the interviews to clarify my role as a researcher. I informed them about my former profession as a teacher and reassured them that I held no preexisting beliefs about their roles. I dealt with this *via* being honest with them about my teaching (SEN) background and the fact that I was not expecting right or wrong answers. I simply wanted them to be as honest as possible. I intended to use my SEN practitioner background as a 'common bond' between me and the participants hoping this would also help them with opening up to me. This shared professional bond aided me in gaining their trust which I felt was also achieved by my letting them know that their opinions mattered and that I saw them as partners in this research process. After all, I was conducting this study with them rather than on them. This methodology enabled me to conduct the interviews with efficiency as it enabled them to share their information openly and without fear of being judged. The ethical approval was provided by the Department of Educational Studies' Research Ethics & Integrity Committee of Goldsmiths, University of London.

Intersectionality is one of the main topics and forms of critical inquiry used within academia and it is a tool through which social injustices and inequalities can be explored (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Intersectionality enables us to explore how inequalities of race, sexuality, age, gender, ability, ethnicity and race impact each other and how they are experienced concurrently (ibid). By examining the intersections at play we can analyze what imbalances are involved in relation to multiple social identities (Buchanan & Settles, 2014). Intersectionality as a theoretical framework is the perfect tool through which to see inequalities of different kinds through the eyes of others and not just through our own viewpoints (Walker, 2003). It is the ideal theoretical framework for this study also because it has transformed how gender is discussed in research (Shields, 2008) and also because it helps us understand how sexual identity and gender identity interact and impact one another (Diamond & Butterworth, 2008). In this paper, I focus on discussing the ways in which intersectionality advances our understanding of the inequalities within the SEN educational system based on sexuality, gender identity, disability and age.

Key themes from the interview data

Participants' responses show there are three types of key findings with regard to the intersections in disability, LGBT+ identities and age, in relation to the attitudes of some SEN practitioners that contribute to the reinforcement of the belief that sexuality and gender identity are a phase or a trend. All participants reject the following three types of negative attitudes toward the concept of LGBT+ identities of disabled pupils. The three key themes are as follows: the first one is *Impressionability* which relates to SEN practitioners' fears of being accused of influencing LGBT+ pupils when teaching about LGBT+ concepts (disabled young people are often seen as non-sexual or too inappropriate with the way they express their LGBT+ identities); the second key theme is *Saying the "wrong" thing*—it relates to SEN practitioners' fear of frightening and confusing SEN learners with LGBT+ information, especially in the case of older school staff (due to a lack of LGBT+ related training/guidance SEN practitioners can believe that LGBT+ education can frighten those with SEND); the third key theme is *Attention-seeking* which refers to validating the LGBT+ voices of SEN learners as too difficult for practitioners uncomfortable with the LGBT+/SEND intersection and with the idea of LGBT+ inclusion itself (delegitimising the LGBT+ voices based on ignoring the LGBT+/SEND overlap and calling it a 'phase' or a 'trend').

The first key theme can be linked to the misconception that individuals with SEND are non-sexual or engage in "risky" sexual behaviors (Gill, 2015) or that they can be lured into transitioning (Moore, 2022). The second key theme links with the misconception of universal heterosexuality and attempts to present education that is sensitive to LGBT+ issues (Ji & Reiss, 2022). The third key theme is linked to the misconception that 'their sexuality or gender identity can be attributed to going through a phase' (Toft et al., 2019b, cited in Toft, 2020, p. 1894). These misconceptions are harmful to the wellbeing and academic progress of learners with SEND as they put them into the category of the 'un-educable' and 'incapable' of understanding or having LGBT+ identities due to their SEND. Their sexualities and gender identities are viewed by some SEN practitioners as a result of their SEND. These misconceptions are in contrast to the views of the participants themselves but are familiar to them in relation to witnessing the attitudes of some other practitioners. According to the participants, their settings' curriculum is still binary to a large extent and contributing to the perpetuation of the heteronormative assumptions about gender (there is only one correct way to be male or female) and about sexuality (ideas about who is allowed to even have a romantic partner). Participants expressed views that LGBT+ concepts need to be

more embedded in their everyday school culture to make all staff consistent in their views about LGTB+ inclusion for learners with SEND. Pedagogies that embrace students' whole identities inspire identity-focused reflection and may contribute to more ethical teaching (Moore, 2016; Norton, 2013).

This section will now present the three key themes in more detail. Each section starts with an illustrative quotation combined with a narrative showing where participants' views with regard to "popular" misconceptions that might or might not affect SEN practitioners. This will be then followed by a reference to literature to discuss the intersections involved and draw parallels. This will then be analyzed in direct relation to the participants' shared experiences highlighting the steps they feel SEN settings and SEN practitioners should do in order to challenge existing barriers to effective LGBT+ SEND inclusion.

Impressionability

I had the freedom in my previous school to adapt the RSE syllabus for my lessons...I appreciate most staff who are teaching sex Ed. would...worry about approaching the first conversations with young people... due to thinking that they could be accused by others of influencing their SEN learners in some way... I suppose a parent could argue that maybe that gave some of the LGBT young people ideas. I would say it actually made them feel validated... Some of them would visit me after the lessons to ask more questions because parents would not chat with them about these things.

These experiences highlight that SEN LGBT+ learners are not always encouraged to express their identity. Their ability to have ideas about sexuality/gender identity is considered to be limited by parents who might see LGBT+ identities as a taboo topic to "protect" their children from whilst at the same time underestimating their child's capabilities as a disabled person (Iarskaia-Smirnova & Verbilovich, 2020; Jahoda & Pownall, 2014; Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2012; Priest, 2019). As pointed out by Davy (2010), the world of medicine (referring to the medical model) and the uncritical members of our society regard disabled and transgender bodies as something that needs fixing because it is "tainted" which supports the idea of seeing the normatively gendered and nondisabled as the ideal state of being. This highlights several layers of inequality as a result of intersections of disability, gender identity, sexuality and age. The myth of the 'forever child', first talked about by Craft many decades ago (1987, p. 14, cited in Chappell, 2015) still continues *via* the notion of "eternal innocence" that is attributed to young people with SEND. This adds an additional layer of stigma linked to the assumption they are too immature to comprehend/explore their own gender identity and sexuality. Infantilising pupils with SEND is very common and involves both parents, teaching

staff and policies (Papadopoulos, 2010; Reynolds, 2019; Wilson & Frawley, 2016).

When this participant was asked about suggesting a key step toward getting rid of barriers such as these, she said:

I think a good place to start would be to have firmer guidelines in place...about how to teach LGBT+RSE to SEN learners. Staff are in a difficult situation because of these vague RSE guidelines that we have. This is where the uncertainty and lack of confidence for many SEN practitioners come from... I mean we have to justify to the parents why we do what we do and then it's the misconception that these kids are babies and always will be...parents tend to think of them as babies...asexual...

Indeed, having more precise RSE guidelines (2019) for primary schools that do not just 'advise' on RSE being LGBT+inclusive could help to dissipate the general assumption that learners with complex needs cannot form their own views about their gender and sexuality. Surrounding this is the general assumption that LGBT+ is considered inferior to heterosexuality (Moagi et al., 2021). Limiting access to LGBT+ information due to a lack of curriculum and policy-related guidelines can negatively impact LGBT+SEN learners' well-being. This can also have a detrimental effect on their academic progress as a binary curriculum makes it hard for trans young people to come out (Paechter et al., 2021). This is a systemic type of barrier to LGBT+SEND inclusion because of the continued focus on heteronormativity being seen as the 'norm' thus supporting the misconception that the LGBT+disabled state of being is not 'nature's ideal'.

Saying the "wrong" thing

...there is this assumption, particularly from the older staff, that being trans is a trend, especially if you use terms, such as gender-fluid...you know this is stuff that they can't wrap their heads around... they didn't have to deal with this for most of their careers...they're behind and their confidence is telling...they can't use the LGBT+terminology, even I struggle sometimes because of the lack of training...but because of what I've experienced working with these children... They educate me about the LGBT+terms...they know more than us!

The fact that the participant acknowledged the range of LGBT+-related knowledge of the SEN learners in her setting is very telling of how capable these SEN learners are to acquire and process LGBT+ information that interests them. As previously stated, disability and age were used to view SEN learners as 'uneducable' about LGBT+ concepts. The experiences described above suggest that some practitioners from older generations find it difficult to adapt to the changes regarding the more inclusive RSE guidelines (2019). This quote is in accordance with Page's (2017) findings that show that older school staff are less comfortable with embracing LGBT+inclusive teaching strategies compared to younger

teachers. More training could address teachers' lack of confidence regarding RSE for learners with SEND (Bray, 2021). Facilitating these learners' voices could help practitioners and parents recognize this category of pupils' autonomy and thus develop more inclusive attitudes toward them (Riddell et al., 2019). LGBT+ concepts still continue to be seen as potentially sensitive topics (Goldstein-Schultz, 2022; Harris et al., 2021). The fear of discussing "sensitive" subjects in schools is also caused by the legacy of Section 28 (Local Government Act, 1988) as it has created a sense of uncertainty and hesitation regarding what should be part of RSE (Toft & Franklin, 2020).

What is "sensitive" and what is not is debatable, especially when it comes to PDA learners. They have their own idea of what gender identity means to them as expressed in the next participant's words:

What is "scary" for PDA kids is when they don't have the information they need as this can affect their anxiety levels. So, we are very open with them. You can't preach to these kids about what gender they should be. Some of them have come to us from mainstream settings... [they] let them know they were different. They were used to masking before.... they change their clothes, hair, names, and pronouns...and hate reminders of their old identity...We've actually noticed positive changes in their behaviours and interactions with others once they've discovered their true gender identity.

This quote is an example of intersections to do with PDA, gender and age and reinforces Moore's (2020) findings in relation to PDA children not giving in to the gendered demands. This participant's experience highlights the multi-layered stigma experienced by ex-mainstream PDA learners whose rejection of gendered expectations resulted in their gender identity being pathologized (ibid) possibly due to staff's poor levels of knowledge about PDA. Another participant expressed similar thoughts on what information is "scary" to pupils with SEND:

They explore their gender identity at different paces and it does not frighten them... to give them this information. It's wrong to say that because now we talk about LGBT+ inclusion in SEN schools more than before... this must be why they're all turning gay and trans and they're confused.... You hear nonsense like that sometimes!

This comment shows that children are able to engage with their educators only when placed into settings with the right (training-based) approach, showing that staff training for both mainstream and SEN settings is important to prevent the discrimination of LGBT+ SEND learners and diminish misconceptions and stigma.

Aside from having a lack of information about SEND-related intersections, the issue of little diversity in schools in rural areas can also influence the link between LGBT+/SEND-related misconceptions and SEN

practitioners' professional attitudes. The next participant commented on this issue of practitioners' backgrounds and personal beliefs. She explained:

I used to work in a small village before and there was hardly any diversity there... the level of students' access to LGBT information is much different in areas that are less diverse. It's better in bigger cities and busy towns. Rural areas... it's a completely different situation and we need more training for SEN professionals. Religious backgrounds can be a barrier...or it can interfere with staff's levels of comfort when it comes to LGBT RSE lessons. They project their fear and their unconscious bias onto students sometimes... not directly but you can see it...it's definitely there!

This quote is evidence that knowledge, comfort and implementation of LGBT+ curriculum materials are correlated with practitioners' location and also with their religious beliefs. It appears that in the case of teachers from less diverse and more religious areas, there is a certain 'low' level of comfort and confidence when it comes to LGBT+ inclusion.

The shared experiences support the narrative that SEN learners are initially treated as someone who will be easily lured into following LGBT+trends due to their "immaturity". This happens in addition to having assumptions that disability increases the likeliness of immaturity and being frightened of "sensitive" topics. The quotes above highlight other practitioners' fear and lack of confidence about various areas (PDA, LGBT+ terminology, etc.) being embedded into their attitudes toward LGBT+ inclusive teaching practices. This combined with some staff's anti-LGBT+ beliefs and generational differences might create some resistance toward SEN learners who simply feel drawn toward living their own self-evident truth rather than bending to societal will.

Attention-seeking

I know she spoke to mum about her gender identity...Her mum was great and she approached us afterwards because Luna wouldn't. So the idea that some practitioners may have...that these children are looking for attention when they experience transitioning...well, that makes no sense to me. Even now it's like a year has passed since then...she knows we all know and she's grown her hair out and so she's open about it...externally...but she won't just engage in these conversations with us very easily. Like I've asked her if she is going to continue to grow her hair...and she said 'yeh' and then changed the subject.

This quote highlights the intersection in relation to PDA, gender and age again—this time in the context of so-called attention-seeking. The need to avoid demands prevents any conversations about gender identity if they start to feel like a demand to a PDA child. The need to avoid demands is greater than any need for "attention-seeking". This next participant comments on how being LGBT+ is seen as a result of having SEND and therefore, it "must" be a phase:

... most of them want to transition because they want to find their true identity and be true to themselves and we get that. However, once I had a PDA pupil who was new and came over to us from a mainstream school and she had a history of mental health issues and there was lots of falling out with people. So, she was already going through her gender exploration time when she first came to my class...and she did that to see if she would be like...more liked...she talked about making friends. She thought that could be a way to go about that. Some colleagues saw this as a phase but gender identity exploration takes time and there is a certain period to it all. If she changes her mind after all that's fine. That's what exploration is for.

The area of PDA in relation to gender identity is still under-researched. However, the quote above seems to reinforce some of the findings in relation to the intersections regarding autism and gender. According to Kourti and MacLeod (2019), autistic individuals find it difficult to conform to gender-based social expectations which are similar to PDA children's need to avoid gendered demands (Moore, 2020). Whereas the need to be different (and change one's gender identity as a result) is motivated by the PDA child's own interests (thus maintaining their autonomy) the motivators for autistic individuals could be different. They could be partially motivated by pressure from others to be different, such as becoming girly, etc. (Kourti & MacLeod, 2019).

Has it occurred to anybody that you have had these thoughts and feelings from a very young age? I mean...Just because it wasn't talked about... doesn't mean the feelings weren't there. I mean, I've got friends who have known (it) for a very long time... gender's not a thing...So why do they know what a boy and a girl is?... because that's not real, but you're happy to teach them about that! You're happy to give them pink clothes for a girl and blue for a boy. Well, that's made up as well! Actually, pink used to be for the boys back in the day... Basically, these kids don't really care about societal norms because they have their own way of thinking and who are we to say that that's wrong? ...just because we're neurotypical?? One teaching assistant once said to me that she thought being LGBT+ and being gay is looking for attention from others because they have difficulties communicating with others...so it's a way for them to connect and stand out more.

This participant offers an interesting rationale, making connections between a social constructionist perspective of sex and gender to explain how she sees her pupils understand their LGBT+ identities. This way of perceiving gender and sexuality does not mean they are in a passing phase. This participant also brings attention to some practitioners seeing sexuality as a 'consequence' of their SEND and thus suggesting that their disability informs their sexuality. The participant also highlights ableist attitudes suggesting pupils with SEND are easily labeled as attention-seekers for having LGBT+ identities rather than believed which is something that is unlikely to happen in the case of non-disabled individuals.

Sexuality and gender identity of disabled LGBT+ pupils are seen as a result of their SEND and thus appear to be a perpetuation of the medicalization of LGBT+ identities (Toft et al., 2020). Non-disabled people are generally more respected in terms of their self-identity (Murugami, 2009). In other words, they are assumed to understand what their (LGBT+ and other) identities are. This is in sharp contrast to people with SEND whose identities are medicalised and who are not seen as functioning “normally” (Watson, 1998). They can have their decisions to self-identify as LGBT+ easily questioned (Toft & Franklin, 2020). In fact, any decisions disabled children make can be viewed as the result of their SEND identity because they are seen as unreliable ‘and ignorant to be trusted to exercise their own rights’ (Alderson, 2018, p.176). There are clearly parallels when it comes to the medicalization and pathologisation of homosexuality (Weeks, 2012; Narrain & Chandran, 2015) and other aspects of being LGBT+ (i.e. gender) which is a form of othering (Nartey, 2022). If both, disabled and LGBT+ identities, carry a certain stigma and are presented as something that needs fixing then it is easy to see why they are delegitimised so easily.

Conclusion

This article addresses a gap in the literature regarding the voices of SEN school practitioners with an experience of working with LGBT+ pupils with SEND. The findings are significant because they indicate that this idea of LGBT+ phase/trend is continued both in society and in the SEND community—showing that the LGBT+ SEND intersection is poorly understood in our society and also amongst SEN practitioners. The paper suggests there is a link between wider society’s misconceptions and some of the attitudes of SEN practitioners resulting in questioning the levels of understanding and quality of support in relation to this marginalized category of pupils. The shared experiences presented and the analysis itself show that the idea of SEN learners following LGBT+ trends and/or going through LGBT+ phases is a portrayal of injustices and othering of pupils with SEND as a result of the intersection of disability, sexuality, gender identity and age. These inequalities are harmful to LGBT+ pupils with SEND as it reaffirms misconceptions about their disabled identities and LGBT+ identities, presenting them as too impressionable, easily frightened or confused and seeking attention. Ignoring one or both of these identities marks them as flawed, therefore in need of “fixing”. It also limits or stops their access to LGBT+ information and wellbeing support. The shared views of the participants challenge the misconceptions and call for a better understanding, support, policy-making and more consistent teaching practices regarding sexuality and gender identity of LGBT+ pupils with SEND. This study will hopefully serve as a useful source of information regarding

the next steps necessary to embrace a more inclusive way of thinking about the LGBT+ identities of pupils with SEND.

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Ethics

I confirm that I have obtained ethical approval for the study described in this manuscript from the Goldsmiths Departmental Ethics Committee (Educational Studies Department, Goldsmiths, University of London). This was approved by the committee the first time I applied for their approval. The study involves adult human participants. All participants provided informed consent once they read the participant information sheet and agreed to take part in the research project.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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