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Teaching “controversial topics”: Acknowledging the voices of LGBT+ pupils in schools with SEND provisions

Since the repeal of [Section 28](#) of the 1988 Local Government Act in 2003, research and policy reform has explored ways to decrease homo/bi and transphobia to make schools more LGBT+ inclusive places. However, both heteronormativity and cisnormativity continue to manifest in various ways which has a negative impact on both the safety and mental health of LGBT+ pupils. These issues are compounded specifically in relation to student wellbeing in cases when students from the LGBT+ community also have a special educational need or disability. Furthermore, the more [inclusive government guidelines](#) (2021) on Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) policy mean that secondary schools must be inclusive of LGBT+ young people’s relationships, experience and sexual health and this includes young people with SEND. At primary level, however, schools are only ‘strongly advised’ by the government to be LGBT+ inclusive.

My PhD research includes exploring the vulnerabilities that play out for LGBT+ pupils with special educational needs or disabilities within the context of LGBT+ inclusion in primary and secondary school education. So far, I have come across many distressed LGBT+ pupils from England’s schools with SEND provisions, including primary schools. Despite inroads being made in policy, the blind spot over primary level RSE can leave some primary school children with trans identities vulnerable to the risk of bullying. For example, many staff from primary schools with SEND provisions that I have interviewed as part of my PhD research project, shared that there is a considerable level of fear and stigma present amongst the staff regarding the concept of gender identity. Known as cisnormativity, which is the assumption that all people identify as the gender they were assigned at birth ([Stewart et al., 2022](#)), many schools in England also have signs of heteronormative bias embedded in their curriculum and culture. Heteronormativity is the assumption that all people are heterosexual ([ibid](#)). Having largely heteronormative and cisnormative school cultures can indirectly put pressure on this category of pupils to hide all or parts of their LGBT+ identities. If an LGBT+ pupil happens to also have SEND, this intersectional aspect can lead to layered stigma and marginalisation. For instance, I have met autistic trans pupils who have shared with me that they often feel like [masking](#) (camouflaging) aspects of their LGBT+ identities as well as certain traits of their neurotypes in order to be more accepted in heteronormative and cisnormative school environments. Masking is common for autistic individuals in various

(usually stressful) social situations and can have a detrimental impact on their mental health ([Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019](#); [Miller, Rees & Pearson, 2021](#)).

The approach to LGBT+ inclusion in the schools with SEND provisions, whose staff and pupils I have interviewed, can be understood as performative. In other words, LGBT+ inclusive efforts occur mostly on the “surface” level and are not effective or deep enough to help LGBT+ pupils with SEND feel truly acknowledged or validated in terms of their voices. Misconceptions within the wider society can influence some school staff working with pupils with the LGBT+ SEND intersection which can have an impact on the levels of support available to them. For example, this includes misconceptions about young disabled people’s abilities to have LGBT+ identities due to having a disability ([Toft, Franklin and Langley, 2019](#)). Another misconception I have come across is in relation to autistic pupils who identify as trans. They can often be regarded as someone who is following a “trans trend” rather than believed about their feelings towards their gender identity. This is despite the fact that autistic individuals might be three times more likely to identify as transgender ([Warrier et al., 2020](#)). In light of these misconceptions, it is clear that LGBT+ pupils have to work hard to make sense of who they are, often with limited support in schools. This is complicated by the idea of teaching about LGBT+ concepts being seen as the same thing as teaching controversial topics. RSE is still impacted by Section 28 (Local Government Act, 1988) in ways that have created a sense of uncertainty and hesitation regarding what should be part of RSE ([Toft and Franklin, 2020](#)). The question then is how do we overcome our ways of thinking as educators so that LGBT+ pupils with SEND are better supported?

To answer this question, it is best to start with defining controversial issues as ‘those that have a political, social or personal impact and arouse feeling and/or deal with questions of value or belief’ ([Oxfam, 2006, p. 2](#)). Based on my previous SEN practitioner experience, what makes LGBT+ concepts controversial is often the fact that they are not spoken about regularly, openly or without fear or stigma. One way to stop LGBT+ concepts being seen as too controversial to discuss in the classroom, is to validate the views of LGBT+ pupils with SEND. Discussing these “controversial” subjects in the classroom can be a powerful tool for pupils to take ownership of their learning, explore their values, learn to respect others’ opinions and think critically, too. This way, pupils in general, will become more prepared for dealing with the stigma and marginalisation that young LGBT+ people can experience in schools ([Dellenty, 2019](#); [Harris, Wilson-Daily and Fuller, 2021](#)) and help to create a shift from pathologisation to LGB/trans-positivity.

To achieve more open and progressive conversations within the classroom, teachers might want to consider making ground rules with their pupils to ensure

a safe environment for all to share views and to learn from each other. We often assume that we know what pupils need to learn. Instead, teachers should aim to develop a range of participatory approaches when it comes to teaching LGBT+ concepts. For example, creating learning activities using photos that explore these topics from a range of perspectives could be one useful way of overcoming the fear around LGBT+ concepts. This is likely to have a positive impact on the wellbeing of LGBT+ pupils with SEND. In addition, it will build a community of LGBT+ allies from an early age which can only benefit pupils from primary settings as well as those who will eventually transition into secondary schools.

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