

A to Z of LGBTQ+ Inclusion and Belonging in Schools: poster explanation

This resource can be used to stimulate conversation with staff or students around the position of LGBTQ+ inclusion and belonging in any school.

The choice of both terms inclusion and belonging is deliberate:

- **Inclusion can mean that there are strategies in place.**
- **Belonging means that LGBTQ+ staff, students, parents and any visitors feel welcome.**

Hence, these strategies are successful.

This resource is published from the findings of a research study focused on interviews with LGBTQ+ teachers.

A. Allies & LGBTQ+ staff

Allyship is an important aspect of developing and maintaining change in school communities for both staff and students. Some examples of LGBTQ+ inclusion work were led by a team of allies and LGBTQ+ staff members.

However, many of the LGBTQ+ staff in this study led the LGBTQ+ inclusion and often had to advocate for change. This was seen as both a privilege and a burden.

Not all LGBTQ+ staff want to be involved in LGBTQ+ inclusion work, and it is important that 'diversity' is not solely the responsibility of the 'diverse' member of staff.

For those who do want to be involved, their voices and opinions could be very important in both understanding inclusion and the school environment. They have direct experience.

However, if the member of LGBTQ+ staff does take on the responsibility it is important that they themselves are not isolated. This can result in unnecessary 'emotional labour'.

There was also an example in this study where the non-LGBTQ+ senior member of staff felt they were the expert and other voices were not heard – the junior LGBTQ+ staff member felt isolated and undervalued. Hence, the attempt at allyship was misguided.

In summary, allyship is needed to implement, support and maintain change – within this, listening to LGBTQ+ voices is integral.

B. Books, stories and libraries

At all levels books and libraries can largely be deemed safe spaces, where students can explore ideas within imaginary environments.

In this study, much of the work by primary school teachers involved using stories and books to understand themselves, empathise with others and difference, and specifically learn about LGBTQ+ families and people.

“So, there are different ways we do it. Sometimes it’s through books and reading stories ... the majority of the kids are just so blasé about it.” (gay, male, primary school teacher)

The original research that recommended this is by Rene DePalma and Elaine Atkinson’s 2009 research and book – Interrogating Heteronormativity in the primary school. This is replicated by wider recent guidance (See Andrew Moffat’s No Outsiders or Ellie Barnes’ Educate and Celebrate).

This is also replicated in work in North America (see research by Mollie Blackburn)

For young adults, books can often be an escape, as well as give knowledge and information concerning sensitive topics.

Another approach may involve students in their own creative writing projects, which can be powerful (see work by Mollie Blackburn)

Primary schools may want to review the books in their classrooms. Secondary schools may want to review their books in their libraries.

C. Consistency & Coherency

This may concern reacting to unacceptable behaviour.

Several LGBTQ+ staff mentioned that they responded in one way to something inappropriate and this would either a) not followed up by other staff or b) they would give a different response from another member of staff.

In some schools that were more successful with LGBTQ+ inclusion, there were clear joined up strategies that were consistently applied.

“if the kids answer them really kind of sincerely and say ‘I do acknowledge it's wrong, I shouldn't have said’ [something anti-LGBTQ]. They still have a consequence so they would go into an internal exclusion. And then that will be checked by the Internal Exclusion manager, but also a member of the LGBT staff team and then we would contact parents, tell about that and it made it quite clear that it’s on their school records, and if it happens again then it will be obviously followed up by someone senior.” (gay, male, secondary school)

A consistent and coherent approach should also be an aim of proactive planning and strategies.

D. Diversity

LGBTQ+ people identities can be intersectional, such that someone can be a person of colour and LGBTQ+ or religious and LGBTQ+ and so on.

Being part of two marginalised identities can significantly impact people - In this study, if people shared intersecting identities, then they often stated it was more important to be visible.

“I’m Indian and gay and so for me to shy away from that, would I feel be detrimental to the overall kind of growth of people in school who identify with me on either of those things.” (gay, male, secondary school)

LGBTQ+ people are also found all over the world, with various laws impacting them differently.

Hence, in general, it is important that LGBTQ+ is not only presented through a White and Western lens.

E. Everyday, Embedded & Embraced

This is key. Hence, the title of the linked report. It does not mean that everyday there is an LGBTQ+ topic, it is more that LGBTQ+ subtly becomes part of everyday language, practice and behaviours, rather than everything being framed around heterosexuality and cisgender norms.

Instead of one off PSHE lessons on LGBTQ+, consider strategies for embedding provision across the curriculum and school culture.

Studying a topic in isolation means it stays in isolation. It stays as something extra that sits outside the actual school community.

“Just kind of make it part of life and practice within the classroom.” (gay, male, secondary school)

“It doesn't have to be in your face all the time and kind of classrooms painted the rainbow flag to get LGBT mentioned. It just has been little ways of doing it, so kids just kind of accept it” (gay, male, secondary school)

It is important that this is done positively and committedly, rather than being an add-on.

F. For all Families

Families are perhaps the key topic that gets mentioned by primary school teachers.

This includes teaching about families as a topic, the families of school students, and also that of school staff.

As well as books that represented different kinds of families, primary school teachers particularly thought it was important they could talk about their families, in the same way

that heterosexual and cisgender colleagues. If they could not, this could become a barrier within the classroom.

“... sort of being honest in the same way as your heterosexual colleagues. If they're allowed to talk about their wife and children, why can't I talk about my husband and my children?”. (gay, male, secondary school)’

Historically, LGBTQ+ people have been excluded by not being deemed as ‘proper’ families
This language links back to Section 28 and is deeply discriminatory.

This can impact school students and their parents or guardians, but it can also impact school staff.

It is part of a wider understanding that families come in all shapes and sizes – which also affects secondary schools

In this study, some schoolteachers experienced discrimination where they were prevented from mentioning their partners – but their heterosexual colleagues were permitted by default.

“‘There's a policy in our code of conduct that says we will not talk about our personal lives’. And he [SLT] sat across from me and said ‘yes, I wrote that ‘and I said, ‘but people talk about their personal lives’”. (gay/lesbian, secondary school)

G. Groups for staff & students

In secondary schools, many of the participants of this study had implemented or observed specific groups for LGBTQ+ students – mostly these were for students, occasionally they were for staff and students.

Mostly these were LGBTQ+ specific – sometimes they were about wider equality, diversity and inclusion.

These groups ranged from safe spaces to share knowledge and compassion – to groups who impacted their school’s curriculum, and beyond.

It may be that allies are also an important part of these groups.

For primary schools, this may not be possible, but it is important that school staff do not feel isolated and there may be ways to connect across local schools, or trusts.

H. Challenge Hierarchies & stereotypes

LGBTQ+ people should not be seen as a deficit. They should also not be seen as lesser than heterosexual or cisgender people.

This is also within the LGBTQ+ category, where the focus can more often be on the L and G.

“Being white middle class and gay is fantastic. You know there's not a problem with that. Being white working class and Bi or white working class and trans or black and trans is not acceptable”. (trans, secondary school)

At the moment the T is the category of people that can suffer the most discrimination.

And in the study, most concern was expressed for trans students in the current climate.

Schools are very gendered binary spaces (see recent work by Carrie Paechter, Alex Toft and Anna Carlile) – which may include uniforms, facilities, or school practices both within and beyond the classroom

Wider research (see The 2022 Girlguiding survey) talks of the problems of gender stereotyping and gendered violence and harassment in schools, this can impact all people in schools. However, it can cause particular problems for LGBTQ+ people, who often do not fit gender binaries and stereotypes.

“And they basically said ... perhaps I should wear hair slides to make my gender more apparent and less confusing.”(non binary, lesbian/gay, primary school)

More generally it is important that LGBTQ+ is not contained by stereotypes. What it means to be LGBTQ+ is culturally broad. Some LGBTQ+ people may enjoy Pride style social events, whilst others may not.

I. Institutional change not just individuals

This is also a key idea. Individual teachers can inspire and do great work, they are more often than not the facilitators of change. This can be a joy and give teachers a sense of pride, but it can also be a burden. This has special significance if you are LGBTQ+ (see Christy Newman et al. 2021, and their idea of ‘inclusivity labour’ – where the person with the marginalised identity has to do extra work to ensure their needs are being met – it is emotionally and practically demanding).

“I'm not getting paid. I feel really supported, but at the same time I feel as though I have to do it, 'cause no one else will ... it's all done in my own time”. (gay, male, secondary school).

Hence, there are two key takeaways – are there changes in the systems and structure of the school – and are these changes embedded in policies and practices? Will they stand up if key staff leave?

In relation, is the school reliant on one key staff member or is the work shared by a group of staff?

One example from the study is where a schoolteacher started to implement ideas by himself – but then brought others into the team – LGBTQ+ people and LGBTQ+ allies. This makes the work more manageable, and sustainable moving forwards in the school.

J. Joyful (not just negatives)

Schools may initially decide to implement inclusion as an anti-bullying practice. Indeed, this is one way that some schools will justify this provision – (see Anna Carlile, 2021) – and it was the first messages and policies that came from government post the Equality Act 2010.

Whilst this approach may provide strategies for improving school sanctions, it will not necessarily lead to LGBTQ+ people being viewed as rounded individuals

This approach can frame LGBTQ+ people as victims and can therefore be constraining. See studies by Eleanor Formby, 2015 or Daniel Monk 2011)

The counterbalance to this is the notion of Pride, which come from LGBTQ+ people claiming space and celebrating their identities when historically they were not permitted to do this publicly.

This approach will arguably also not reduce any structural inequalities (for more read CJ Pascoe's 2014 work – Bullying as social Inequality)

Being LGBTQ+ is neither wholly negative or positive for most people – just like every other aspect of people's identities.

K. Knowledge & easy to implement ideas

Many staff will have the best of intentions, but may struggle to know what to do.

Staff training is of course important. However, this needs to be accessible, tangible, and sustainable.

One participant described how all new staff are met and advised on LGBTQ+ inclusion, moreover, that they are given several key strategies to implement.

**“if we find out that a student has even just used the word gay in a lesson in a negative context, what happens is we have a set of questions that we have to ask them, and those questions are mainly to develop confidence for staff, because staff felt uncomfortable”
(gay, male, secondary school)**

L. Language matters

How people talk about LGBTQ+ people and matters is another key idea. For language to be inclusive – attention should be paid to pronouns which can be very important – misgendering can cause significant stress to the individual.

In the study, a non-binary teacher explained how the assumption is they were a Miss, when instead they preferred Mx – and this misgendering, led to them feeling isolated in school.

Some of this was set up automatically by systems. This came up in other examples, where parents were assumed to be one man and one woman.

In other regards, many staff in the study give examples of using gender neutral pronouns for their partners before feeling comfortable enough to identify themselves as LGBTQ+.

In relation, it is helpful and more inclusive when colleagues do not make assumptions about partners pronouns or gender.

Language also impacts more broadly, with gay as a derogative statement still present in many schools.

How we speak about something creates a sense of whether it is positive, negative or neutral. For LGBTQ+ people this can be very important.

M. Management & leadership

Another finding is that senior leadership are key gatekeepers in enabling whether LGBTQ+ inclusion happens and to what level. This can also include the governing body.

In the study, there were examples of all levels of support and non-support. Many staff stated they were able to implement LGBTQ+ inclusion in schools, they had excellent support from senior leadership and the governing body

“Our school have been 100% supportive of this. We have. We have a linked governor on a governing body and who is our champion really as well for that. Because we understand the importance of it” (gay, male, secondary school)

There were examples of deliberate obstruction by senior staff.

This included:

- Members of staff being told they could not be publicly ‘out’ to students as it did not follow policy – some of this was in schools that had LGBTQ+ inclusion awards.
- Senior staff preventing any more LGBTQ+ inclusion work happening in schools.
- Senior staff gatekeeping what was appropriate – and in one case stereotyping LGBTQ+ people in a derogatory manner.
- Senior staff not supporting LGBTQ+ staff who were abused or bullied.

“So, it came out in a lesson that I obviously had a female partner. ‘The kids were like, ‘oh, wow, wow,’ you know, and then I’ll be honest with you, a lot of the kids kind of turned it against me ... I would get comments like ‘fuck off, you lesbian’ or ‘you dyke’ or something like that ...yeah, so I went to the Headteacher and I told her what happened and her and all she said to me was well. ‘Have you told them you’re gay’ and I looked at her and I went well ‘does that matter’ and she said well ‘if you’re gonna broadcast that, then obviously you’re going to have to expect that’.” (female, gay/lesbian, secondary school)

“When it’s on stairwells [homophobic abuse], when it’s in corridors, it has been said to me, if we can’t identify the kids, there’s nothing we can do” (gay, male, secondary school)

N. Parents, guardians, & the Neighbourhood

LGBTQ+ people will be in the student body, the parent body, the staff body (teaching and non-teaching) and the wider community.

There may be connections that can be made to wider community LGBTQ+ groups who may know specifics about the local area of the school, that could help localise general and national policies. There were several examples of this in the study.

There may be visits that can be made to LGBTQ+ groups in other local schools.

One student group, from the study, delivered training for a local health service – in return the local health service delivered training on LGBTQ+ health for the school.

Hence, a suggestion is to make the connections to the wider environment and community.

O. Openness

More inclusive schools have an openness about the topics of sexuality, gender and that this may impact people in their schools.

This does not need to relate to staff or students being ‘open’ about their sexuality – this is more complex and sensitive.

The closet is quite a complicated idea. It can create a narrative of shame around not being ‘open’ about one’s sexuality (See Steven Seidman).

There were examples in this study where school staff felt guilt or shame for not being able to do more, and for not being ‘open’ with their students.

There were also examples in my study of people not being comfortable being out in school as they were concerned for the reputation they had built.

However, not being able to discuss who you are can also lead to distress, thus being out can be a psychological as well as a political need (see the work of Emily Gray, 2013).

Not ‘being yourself’ can also lead people to feel isolated from fellow staff member or students.

In this study, most staff felt more comfortable when they could be themselves, in similar ways to heterosexual and cisgender colleagues – who are largely open by default.

If they were open with students, staff often stated they felt this helped them build relationships with students (see Llewellyn 2022). They also felt it was important in presenting LGBTQ+ as normal and everyday.

“She actively normalises, being like ‘I have short hair, but I’m a girl. I have a girlfriend because girls can marry girls’”. (secondary school teacher talking about her primary school teacher girlfriend)

However, it is important to note that a few members of staff did not feel being open was supported, either by students or staff

“I have decided that I can no longer be a secondary school teacher. Because I’m gay, there is some harassment every day.” (gay, male, secondary school)

In short, people should ‘come out’ in their own time, but schools should be places where everyone feels they are safe to do this with support.

“You can't just expect the gay teachers to be open in a school where that's not supported, because that's really putting your head above the parapet, in perhaps an unsafe way, so really important, but it can't just be expected of those teachers” (gay, male, secondary school)

Finally, within hetero-cisnormative society, ‘coming out’ is not a one off occurrence, but is often something that LGBTQ+ people make a choice to do (or not) every day.

P. Proactive not just reactive

This is another key idea. Staff consistently mentioned the value of planning for inclusion, and the problems that can occur when schools do not.

“There was no plan for how we're going to tackle homophobia”. (gay, male secondary school)

This works on multiple levels. First it gives school staff more control of situations and outcomes. Second, it means consideration has been given to the needs of students, staff and parents, before they are identified as a problem – thus making schools safer for all.

This includes planning tactics to counteract anti-LGBTQ+ behaviours. Examples from the study included clear stages of action or discipline – but also restorative justice or education.

“So we have a restorative approach system in our school. So we based the questions [that staff ask students] on that and it's on the back of a card that has our LGBT logo on and the card is in everyone's classroom, everyone's office” (gay, male, secondary school)

More broadly this enables the school to plan broader aspects of equality, diversity and inclusion which work towards the school being a more holistically positive space for LGBTQ+ people. This may specifically include addressing the culture, climate and/or curriculum.

Most importantly, if the school is proactive it avoids the situation of the ‘sacrificial lamb’ – where policies and practices are changed to address someone’s needs – this may cause stress to the individual (see Elizabeth Meyer’s 2016 work)

For example, whilst many of the school staff in this study thought schools had responded well to having a trans student in their school – schools had often changed because of the

presence of that student. Schools that are better positioned for LGBTQ+ already have these policies and practices in place.

Q. **Quality not tokenism**

In the study there were a couple of examples of schools that did some aspects of LGBTQ+ provision, but where the LGBTQ+ member of staff did not feel included.

This included a school whose aim was to achieve an LGBTQ+ award – arguably this superseded the need to provide an inclusive LGBTQ+ space.

“Also at one point we were told that we shouldn't be promoting homosexuality ... So, they want to be inclusive but inclusive, meaning like, inclusive on paper” (female, gay/lesbian, secondary school)

Sara Ahmed (2007; 2012) calls this ‘doing the document, rather than doing the diversity’ – she explains how following a tick box culture alone is not enough to promote an inclusive environment.

Joseph Hall (2018) in his article, “The Word Gay has been Banned but People use it in the Boys’ Toilets whenever you go in’ also gives an example of where students can give ‘acceptable’ answers and use ‘acceptable’ language in the presence of teachers but have different behaviours amongst their peers. This is arguably about giving the correct answer to each different audience.

Hence, awards and statutory requirements can be generators for LGBTQ+ inclusion, but it can be important to look beyond them.

R. **Positive with Religion**

There were also examples in the study, of staff working positively with religion. For Church of England schools, this largely came from their 2019 document ‘Valuing All God’s Children’

Other positive examples of inclusion largely came from supportive diocese or religious leaders. Or that inclusion was framed around love and kindness.

“The school has a chaplain and the chaplain had been amazing. She'd written a piece in the school newspaper as the LGBT Group was getting bigger and more established and we become a Stonewall school she'd written this piece in the newspaper where she did everything that you would want a kind of a vicar to do” (gay, male, secondary school)

However, several in the study who worked in religious schools, or who were religious, often felt restricted by what they could do in their schools.

This more often than not related to how they were viewed as LGBTQ+ teachers.

“I said to the assistant head on diversity day should I be open if you going for this LGBT inclusion award, you know. ‘No, I think you should stay as you are’. Which I found quite, it’s been a bit of a blow really, because the same members staff came to my blessing with my partner” (female, gay/lesbian, secondary school)

Thus, demonstrating the importance of awareness of intersectional LGBTQ+ identities, and how not being included can have a profound impact on staff.

For a discussion of the limits of kindness (in that it masks social inequalities) see CJ Pascoe’s 2023 book – “Nice is not enough”

S. Surveys, audits & information

Before implementing change, it is useful to know your starting point – specifically the state of LGBTQ+ inclusion in your institution. Several schoolteachers in the study stated their schools surveyed school students.

There is a note of caution here, that there was an example where this was used to prevent any further LGBTQ+ inclusion work. The survey enabled senior staff to say the school was safe and no changes needed to be made. Hence, it is also worth considering if the opinions of minority groups – in this case LGBTQ+ people - need to be given special prominence in the data collection.

Other strategies used by school staff were curriculum audits, to identify where strengths and areas for improvement were.

Some teachers started with one or two areas of equality, before building up their curriculums. (See Hannah Wilson and Bennie Kara’s *Diverse Educators: A manifesto* 2022)

T. Talk & discussion

A key idea concerned education – and not just punishment and sanctions. Several school staff stated it was important that students be allowed to talk about their ideas, and become informed – rather than being told they were wrong.

This included in class discussions and educational reprimands for anti-LGBTQ+ behaviour.

“‘Gay people need to be killed’, that sort of stuff. ‘Trans people don’t deserve to live’ ... I kept him out of the next lesson and we just sat and talked about where he got his opinions from”. (gay, male, secondary schools)

U. Update policies

Not all staff in the study were confident that their schools anti-bullying policies specifically mentioned LGBTQ+

Moreover, not all staff believed that LGBTQ+ policies or provision were present more broadly.

For some school staff in this study, policies were reviewed regularly – they were not a static document.

V. Visibility

Just as LGBTQ+ people should have space to be open about their sexuality or gender identity – similarly the broader topic of LGBTQ+ could be more visible around schools – this again, returns to the idea that historically staff and students have been forced to be hidden.

Moreover, representation matters, hence why many staff spoke of being role models and visual representation around schools.

“The kids see our, the [LGBT] logo everywhere they go kind of thing cause visibility is really key to me in schools.” (gay, male, secondary school)

The TIE (Time for Inclusive Education) campaign in Scotland have strong work on the LGBTQ+ role models.

This also mean visible in the curriculums.

“We believe that the curriculum isn’t just in the classrooms, so it's about then creating displays around school so we have kind of LGBT central display in both buildings”. (gay, male, secondary school)

It can mean staff being visible, but this should never be an expectation put onto the staff member. (See Open not Hidden)

W. We not ‘us & them’

It is important that this is LGBTQ+ people are considered as part of the school community and not aside to it. It is important that LGBTQ+ people belong and are not merely accommodated.

The idea of Othering or a ‘them and us’ culture perpetuates discrimination and hierarchies around what is seen as good or bad – or acceptable or unacceptable. This applies to any form of inequality formed around hierarchies. Creating an ‘inclusive ‘we’ culture takes deliberate work through language, actions, culture, climate and curriculum.

One example from the study of where this did not work was where LGBTQ+ people were positioned as existing outside the school and not within it.

“You need to include the statistic that last year in the student safety survey, 99% of students at our school said that they felt safe at school ... [they wanted us to say that] when we’re talking about homophobic bullying, we're not talking about it here.” (female, gay/lesbian, secondary school)

X. Trainers, agencies & eXperts

There are lots of expert groups within the UK, some local and some national that can work with schools in various guises. Some may offer advice and information, whilst others may practically be involved in implementing LGBTQ+ inclusion work.

Many of the participants we spoke to involved outside agencies, including:

- Stonewall
- Educate and Celebrate
- Just Like Us
- LGBT Youth Scotland
- TIE Campaign
- The Proud Trust
- No Outsiders
- Local authorities and councils – for example, ... and Glasgow
- Local youth groups (for example, Brighton Allsorts)
- Local health trusts

Y. Young people & children's voices

This is a key idea. Changes to the school have to work for students and staff – schools will know this by talking to and valuing both staff and students.

In this study many of the schools that valued student opinion and saw them as capable children and young people gave more space for LGBTQ+ inclusion (see Llewellyn 2022). They saw LGBTQ+ inclusion as something they were involved in, not something that was done to them.

“They're really astute. Kids are really, really smart and they understand much more than we think”. (gay/lesbian, female, primary school teacher)

This ranged from children and young people being involved in active decision making and pushing for change, to children facilitating workshops for young people and adults.

“The kids -they started it - they wanted it. And they're the kind of driving force behind it [LGBT inclusion]” (bisexual, male, secondary school)

This included leading assemblies, working with outside agencies, and giving talks to external groups.

“Before I knew it we [LGBT student/staff group] were doing the NHS we were speaking to the children's panel” (bisexual, male, secondary school)

Z. The school Zone as a safe space

This would include every aspect of the school. All general areas for staff and students, not only classrooms, but also recreational areas. Specific areas, such as changing rooms and toilets may need particular consideration.

“Obviously, we are there for the children. But like you’ve just said, there is a legal responsibility and, you know, it’s a workplace and I should not have to go to work and be called ‘gay boy’. Not even just once a week, but several times a day. Like, and be scared of walking up the stairwells in case I get spit on.” (gay, male, secondary school)

Staff rooms and staff areas should also be safe.

“My most recent job, the first week there, the first staff meeting, I went into – and we’re talking 10 years ago, so not like you know, dim and distant history - I was introduced as gay by the leadership team and one of the women who was a teaching assistant said ‘Oh, it turns my stomach, it makes me sick, the thought of two women together.’ And that was sort of laughed at, and there was a very, very negative experience to be going into to start a new job. That was the culture of the place.” (nonbinary, queer, all ages teacher)

Historically LGBTQ+ people were excluded from public life – hence, the need to create their own places. This can still be important for example, ‘groups for staff and students’ however, there is a danger that that becomes the only safe space in the school.

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Further Publications from this Study:

- Llewellyn, A. (2022). *Everyday, Embedded & Embraced: LGBTQ+ teachers' perspectives on LGBTQ+ inclusion in schools*. Schools Report. Durham University
- Llewellyn, A. (2022). Bursting the 'childhood bubble': reframing discourses of LGBTQ+ teachers and their students. *Sport, Education and Society*, 1-14.
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