

HIDDEN IDENTITIES?

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Elly explores the role geography can play in celebrating LGBT+ identities.

Introduction

The percentage of the UK population who self-define as 'Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and other groups of sexual and gender minorities' (or LGBT+) is unclear (Chalabi, 2013); nevertheless, LGBT+ people form part of our everyday culture and society.

In every primary school many pupils will have significant people in their lives identifying as LGBT+, and they may be developing their own gender identities. Yet such identities are often ignored, or overlooked, in both the primary and secondary curriculum.

However, the study of LGBT+ identities is established in many university geography courses (see, e.g. Bell and Valentine, 1995).

Celebrating LGBT+ identities and educating pupils about the real world in primary geography can form part of helping pupils understand the world they live in.

Background

It is now 2016. Homosexuality was legalised in 1967, taken off the mental health list in 1973, and Section 28 (the prohibition on promoting homosexuality by teaching or by publishing material) was repealed in 2003. Today, we have the Equality Act 2010, Ofsted criteria (2013) and the Marriage Equality Act 2014. This legislation enables teachers to adopt classroom strategies that make our pupils aware of the everyday existence of LGBT+ people and is a method that has proved successful in eradicating homophobia, biphobia and transphobia (HBT) from our schools and communities. According to a NatCen report, a whole-school approach:

'was regarded as working better than using only stand-alone teaching on HBT bullying specifically [and the organisation welcomed the move] to "usualise" LGBT people as part of the everyday life, making HBT-bullying less likely to occur' (Mitchell *et al.*, 2014).

Being LGBT+ inclusive in the curriculum

It is important that our resources and lesson plans reflect the fact that the world comprises lots of different types of people and families.

During a training session on LGBT+ inclusivity, one teacher commented: 'I can't believe these are the only books we share with our children. We have to read books about LGBT+ people in our classrooms as that's real life and it's everywhere in our kids lives'.

LGBT+ people are everywhere, however teachers and governors in a significant number of schools remain cautious about including LGBT+ terminology, reading books with LGBT+ characters and adopting an LGBT+ inclusive curriculum within their schools. This is despite of the fact that teaching about different types of families in primary schools is an Ofsted requirement (Ofsted, 2013).

Why is LGBT+ invisible in primary teaching?

Ten years ago I realised that us (the teachers) were simply not talking about LGBT+ people in our lessons. Our silence suggests to young people that there is something wrong with being LGBT+. When, during a session on LGBT+, the silence was broken in my classroom, the floodgates were opened, and my class could not wait to tell me about their families and friends.

Therefore, my starting point with any staff training session is language. We can only be inclusive of LGBT+ people in our lessons if we are sure of the definitions and use the terminology confidently (see web panel).

Every time I deliver LGBT+ lessons in my teacher training, I learn more about both public opinion and the perceived barriers to LGBT+ inclusion. We may just have begun our journey to such inclusion, because teachers are genuinely worried about parents' or carers' reactions, or upsetting people who follow a faith. Out of habit we tend to segregate by gender and to assume everyone is heterosexual

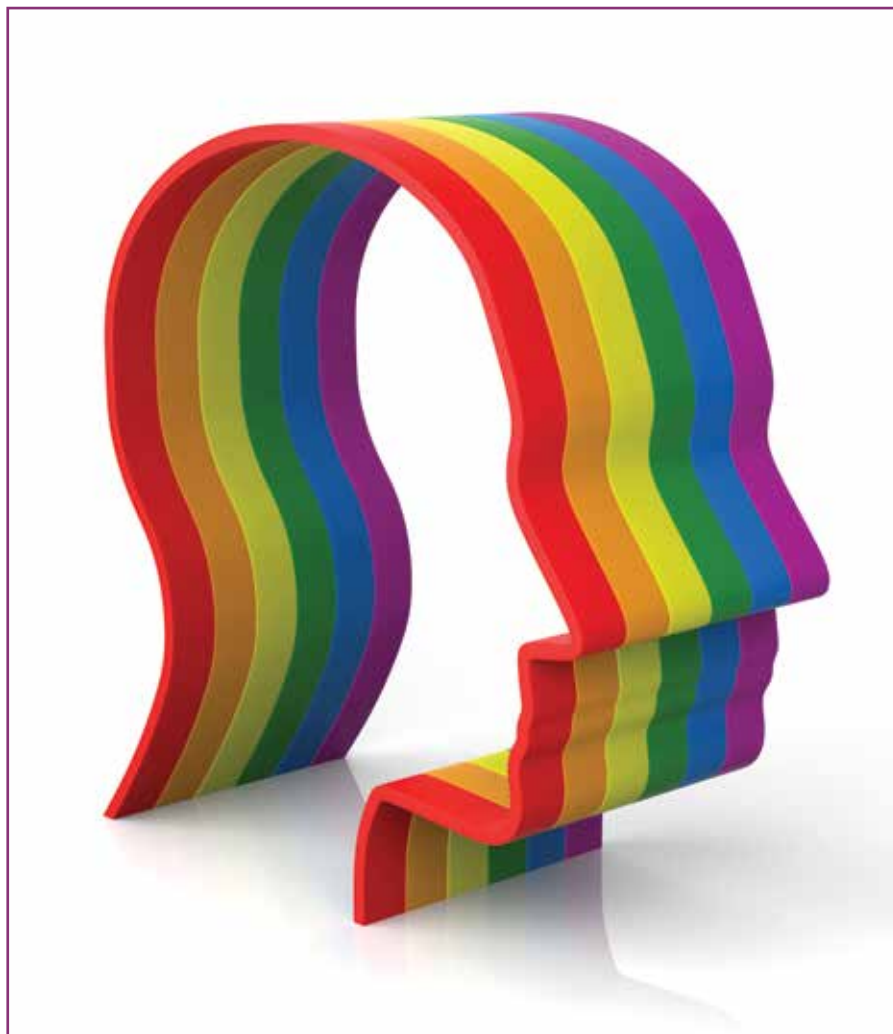


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unless we are told otherwise. Recently, when working with children's centres, the staff mentioned to me that at four years old pupils begin to recognise their gender. However, at three years of age, when they ask all the boys to stand up, they found that all the children would stand up. This then begs the question: why use gender as a method to divide a class, when there are lots of other ways in which we can do this?

As teachers, we can and should attempt to break patterns of heteronormativity and gender-normative approaches. In a recent PGCE session, one student explained they had observed a lesson by an experienced teacher who asked all the girls to clean up for the boys while the latter went out to play. As a trainee they felt they were unable to challenge the teacher, even though they were clearly uncomfortable with the situation. However, I took the opportunity to highlight that we can all play a part in creating positive institutional change by 'Empowering young people to create "a society which reacts angrily to injustice and promptly sets about correcting it"' (Bauman, quoted in Giroux, 2004) and essentially '[i]nterrogate and interrupt the operation of heteronormativity' (De Palma and Atkinson, 2009).

In research with primary schools, I have found that the method of teaching factual LGBT+ related terms with definitions not only increased pupils' vocabulary, but also the words enabled them to articulate their persuasion and reasoning skills. As one Head teacher commented: 'We're giving pupils the words... to say, "I don't think it's ok to be gay, but you can still hold your views based on facts. What you're not entitled to do is treat anyone differently because of any difference". It's like preparing them for a debate. We are giving them the counter arguments to what they hear at home, and I hear the children talk about it in a way that's really encouraging'.

Interestingly, in this research the year 1 and 2 teachers commented that pupils tended not to notice the LGBT+ content of the school's book collection. For example, in *Picnic in the Park* (Griffiths and Pilgrim, 2007) rather than seeing the families with two mums and two dads, the children focused on rainbows, trees and hairstyles. The teacher said: 'they don't see [the LGBT+ relationships]. It's not an issue yet. They are not looking for it'. Another year 1 teacher agreed with the 'starting them early' premise: '[At that age] they just accept everyone's different and everyone's equal. They have no preconceived ideas because it's all new to them. Definitely start from nursery; their first experiences of school should be about acceptance of other people. This is something which all teachers can easily do. I don't think they need specific words of lesbian, gay, etc., but use this terminology further up the

school [pauses to think], I don't know now? Maybe you could, and then it would be less of an issue further up the school. We haven't used the vocabulary in year 1, just "two mummies" and "two daddies"'.

These quotes strongly suggest that early in the primary phase is the right time to begin LGBT+ inclusive education – i.e. well before prejudice sets in. And, geography – as a subject that explores community – is ideal to develop this understanding. It dovetails neatly with an ethnogeographic approach – whereby pupils are supported in developing their understanding of their personal geographies. We can take this further, by making LGBT+ identities more visible at a global cultural level too (download the key stage 2 lesson plan – see web panel).

However, in response one Deputy head's assertion that 'A lot of the parents comments say they are quite happy for us to do our work until it comes to age appropriateness. They consider age appropriate to be key stage 2 [7+]' contradicts previous comments from teachers that reception and key stage 1-age pupils are more accepting and less affected by the use of terminology. If we choose to follow this thinking, might we find ourselves troubleshooting then from year 3 onwards? Furthermore, what about the pupils who do have LGBT+ parents, why should they not be represented until year 3?

Why are teachers and parents fearful? Section 28 has had a long-lasting effect on experienced and trainee teachers who come from a schooling background where LGBT+ identities are invisible. In a recent session, I asked 400 students of their experiences of LGBT+ inclusion. Only two had one LGBT+ inclusion lesson in their entire school careers. Generally, parents are fearful because of lack of initial information, which is true to say of any new initiative in schools. However, NatCen found that 'involvement of parents/carers early on in the plans to reduce potential opposition and backlash [was] seen as working' (Mitchell *et al.*, 2014). This emphasises the importance of having the support of your parent-governors from the outset, as well as engaging those governors and teachers who do follow a faith 'that HBT bullying is about relationships and bullying and not about sex' (Mitchell *et al.*, 2014)

Geography has an important role in helping pupils understand the social world and making LGBT+ lives visible. There are many positive things we can do to ensure LGBT+ inclusivity. You can produce an inclusive greeting at reception, a school code, update your policies, fly the rainbow flag, put up posters, create a book display, stimulate opportunities for conversation and bring the words 'gender identity' and 'sexual orientation' to the forefront and

into everyone's consciousness. My research suggests that these approaches are key to eradicating discriminatory language and, possibly, behaviour. By making these positive changes in your school new pupils and new staff will be immediately influenced, and alter their behaviours in line with the ethos of LGBT+ inclusion. Over time this will assist in our goal to influence the local community in terms of social justice – which is surely a long-term aim of geography.

Note

To help teachers make their school LGBT+ friendly, Educate & Celebrate has produced a range of free resources for use with early years through to year 6 (see web panel).

References

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WEB RESOURCES

Educate & Celebrate:
www.educateandcelebrate.org

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