



**“It’s only made us more  
determined”**

**LGBT+ inclusive primary education in  
England and Wales: overcoming  
objections and developing effective  
practice**

This research and resource represents an ongoing collaboration between Dr Joe Hall (University of Hertfordshire), Professor Robert Vanderbeck (University of Leeds) and diversity and equalities consultant Mark Jennett.

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***“Quite often children leave primary school prejudiced, and that’s not because schools teach it, but they don’t do enough to counter it. And so it’s absolutely our job in primary schools to show diversity in all its forms because actually it’s a little bit too late by the time you’ve got to secondary school. You are a bit hardwired by then.” (Head teacher)***

## Introduction and context

This resource arises from research regarding LGBT<sup>1</sup>+ inclusive primary education and the impact of organised protests against it by parents, religious groups and others. The research was undertaken between 2020 and 2022 to coincide with the introduction of new statutory Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) in schools in England. The research took place in the wake of high-profile anti-LGBT protests in 2019/20 originating outside several Birmingham primary schools.

In June 2019, new guidance was released by the Department for Education entitled *Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education*<sup>2</sup>. This replaced guidance that had been in place since 2000 and which was widely considered out-of-date. The new guidance became statutory in September 2021. It requires that RE (Relationships Education) be taught in all primary schools and that, while it is up to schools to decide when to include LGBT+ identities in their teaching, *“they should ensure that this content is fully integrated into their programmes of study for this area of the curriculum rather than delivered as a standalone unit or lesson. Schools are free to determine how they do this, and we expect all pupils to have been taught LGBT content at a timely point as part of this area of the curriculum”* (Paragraph 37).

The guidance also states that, by the end of primary school, pupils should have an understanding of ‘marriage’, and explicitly notes that marriage in England and Wales is available to both opposite-sex and same-sex couples (p. 21). Additionally, in relation to the expectation that primary pupils understand that there are different forms of families, the guidance notes that families can include ‘LGBT parents’ (paragraph 59).

The direct discussion of ‘LGBT content’ was welcomed as a progressive measure by many supporters of an inclusive approach, but it also helped fuel resistance from opponents (such as through the protest movements discussed below). Some commentators have suggested that the guidance is insufficiently clear about exactly what should be taught and when, and that it is subject to considerable interpretation. They have also argued that, since many children in nursery and reception classes will have same-sex parents, such families should be represented within the curriculum (alongside single, adoptive, fostered and other families) as soon as pupils begin school. Failure to do so, it is argued, may risk creating an impression that such families are less ‘normal’ or acceptable than others, resulting in such children feeling isolated and potentially fostering discriminatory attitudes. Further, the implication that LGBT+ inclusion be can be ‘confined’ to RE or

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<sup>1</sup> Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender.

<sup>2</sup>Department for Education (2019) *Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education: Statutory guidance for governing bodies, proprietors, head teachers, principals, senior leadership teams, teachers*. London: DFE.

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1090195/Relationships\\_Education\\_RSE\\_and\\_Health\\_Education.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1090195/Relationships_Education_RSE_and_Health_Education.pdf); accessed 2 June 2023).

PSHE lessons (while heterosexual and cisgender identities proliferate across the curriculum) may also limit attempts to promote full inclusion.

At the same time, concerns have been raised as to the extent to which objections from parents who oppose the teaching of 'LGBT content' on religious (or other) grounds should be accommodated. In March 2019, high-profile protest movements emerged opposing the provision of LGBT+ inclusive education in a number of primary schools. In particular, sustained protests took place over several months in two Birmingham primaries involving a number of Muslim parents and pupils, as well as agitators from outside of the City and participants with no connection to the school. The protests were described as intimidating by the schools and as upsetting to staff and pupils. Smaller protests also took place in a number of cities and towns.

These events received significant attention in national and local media. The sustained protests at one Birmingham school eventually led to a High Court injunction being granted in November 2019 to protect the area around the School. A number of commentators at the time noted that protests seemed to be enabled and fuelled by ambiguities in the guidance on RE in primary schools and a lack of strong, clear messages from central government about the teaching of 'LGBT content'.

These intersecting events formed the background for our research.

## Why LGBT+ inclusive education matters

Many children in primary schools have LGBT+ parents and other family members. Others will go on to identify as LGBT+ themselves – some while they are still in primary education. Despite improvements to the legal framework governing sexual orientation and gender identity over recent decades, LGBT+ young people still face many challenges, and homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying remain common in schools and beyond<sup>3</sup>. It is vital that children who will go on to identify as LGBT+ themselves – as well as those with LGBT+ family members – receive the same positive messages about their emerging identities as heterosexual and cisgender students take for granted. And all children need to learn that LGBT+ people are present in all societies and cultures and deserve acceptance and respect.

Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) is a key vehicle for this but, for it to be effective, LGBT+ people also need to be visible across all aspects of school life.

**A number of primary schools have been delivering effective LGBT+ inclusive teaching and support for many years. However, it is also the case that, while opposition to LGBT+ inclusion has inspired some schools to do more, others have experienced these challenges as a barrier to promoting full inclusion for LGBT+ pupils, staff and families. Summarising key findings from the research, this resource seeks to capture and share the widespread good practice that exists and also looks at how schools have addressed concerns and moved forward in ways that feel safe and effective for all.**

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<sup>3</sup>Just Like Us (2021) *Growing up LGBT+: The impact of school, home and coronavirus on LGBT+ young people*. England: The LGBT+ Young People's Charity. <https://www.justlikeus.org/blog/2021/11/25/research-report-growing-up-lgbt-bullying/>; accessed 2 June 2023.

## Methodology

Data presented here are drawn from two sources: a **survey** of 630 LGBT+ teaching staff in the National Education Union (NEU) and **individual interviews** with eight Primary educators reflecting on their own and colleagues' practice. Given the high-profile media attention focused on Muslim communities as a result of the organised protests in Birmingham and elsewhere, five further interviews were conducted with members of diverse Muslim communities, including LGBT+ Muslims. These interviews help provide additional context and alternative viewpoints to the dominant media coverage of events.

The survey looked at the extent to which protests have impacted on LGBT+ inclusive education in primary and secondary schools and at perceived confidence amongst those surveyed, their colleagues, and Senior Leadership Teams (SLTs) in delivering/supporting LGBT+ inclusive education. A combination of scale and open-ended questions were used.

In-depth interviews were conducted with four survey respondents and four participants in the original 'No Outsiders' project (see below). Interviewees were at different career stages from newly qualified to Head teachers and reflected a mix of different gender identities and sexual orientations. The interviews covered themes relating to how LGBT+ inclusive primary education has been approached, delivered, supported and challenged – including in relation to the introduction of 'British Values' and statutory RSE – and against a backdrop of protests with particular focus on the impacts of recent protests against LGBT-inclusive education.

### About the No Outsiders project

The No Outsiders project (2006 – 2008) was based at the University of Sunderland and brought academics and teachers together as co-researchers, enabling teachers to develop and explore strategies to address LGBT+ equality in 15 primary schools. The project went on to win a British Educational Research Association award.

Supported by a range of materials – in particular children's books – schools developed a number of distinct approaches to LGBT+ inclusive education. The context in which schools operate has changed in the last 15 years – for example with the passing of the Equality Act, introduction of marriage equality and evolving attitudes to gender diversity. Nevertheless, the flexibility of this approach, which encourages whole-school ownership and includes appropriate CPD, remains key to schools and staff fulfilling their professional obligation to provide an education that challenges all forms of prejudice and is equally relevant and accessible to everyone, whatever their emerging sexual or gender identity.

Subsequently, one of the teachers involved in the original No Outsiders research developed this approach to include, amongst other resources, a scheme of work that addresses other protected characteristics (race, religion and belief, disability etc). Teachers involved in both these distinct initiatives were interviewed for the research that this report draws on.

## The impact of protests on schools: evidence from survey data

This section explores findings from survey data from teaching staff in schools related to the perceived impact of anti-LGBT protests on schools, their staff, and their students.

- Around 35% of respondents said that protests had **impacted on LGBT+ content** in the curriculum of the school in which they worked at least a little. Respondents from primary schools were more likely than those from secondary schools to report that protests had impacted LGBT+ curriculum content significantly or a lot.

*“The protests are a big reason why my school is reluctant to move forward with a coherent LGBT inclusive curriculum.”*

*“I am afraid because of how I have seen other schools, Local Authorities and MPs respond to anti-LGBTQ+ protests. The protests have impacted the confidence of SLT and other staff to include LGBTQ+ identities in the curriculum and to defend LGBTQ+ colleagues.”*

*“There has been no change - we teach the same curriculum and books as those schools who did have protests. The protests knocked the confidence of non-LGBT+ teachers to teach the content for a while but teaching continued and since protests have died down in the news, teaching has continued confidently.”*

*“If anything, it's made us more determined.”*

Respondents noted that, in some cases, **LGBT+ content had been reduced or removed altogether**. Notably, a number reported that schools were less confident to **talk publicly** about work around LGBT+ inclusion – something which is likely to send unhelpful messages, particularly to pupils with LGBT+ families or who are questioning their own identity, that such work is somehow controversial.

*“The school didn't want to talk openly on social media or show off work about Pride Month.”*

*“SLT have used the fear of protests as justification to squash, diminish or micromanage events that have been planned previously. SLT are terrified of parents anyway and notoriously struggle to stand up to forceful or vocal parents.”*

- Between 35-40% of all respondents said that protests had at least some negative effect on their own, colleagues' or SLT's **confidence** to deliver LGBT+ inclusive education – with SLT perceived to be the group most likely to feel less confident as a result of protests. This is significant given that leaders' response is likely to be a key factor in whether or not curriculum and pastoral support will be fully LGBT+ inclusive. There were also examples of staff reporting that their SLT did not waver.

*“The Head is frightened of angering parents and this has an impact on student development as they are deprived of a fully inclusive curriculum.”*

*“I think SLT are terrified of it happening here and would try and avoid it by compromising.”*

*“SLT have implemented the very minimum of LGBT teaching to comply with RSE rules, but I have yet to see it.”*

*“Our strong leadership never allows any wavering or uncertainty around human rights issues.”*

Respondents from primary schools were more likely than those from secondary schools to report that the confidence of school staff and the SLT had been affected by the protests.

Respondents provided multiple explanations for why they thought the protests had impacted negatively on provision. The most common causes cited were the **lack of SLT confidence and / or guidance offered to staff** and ongoing anxiety about (religious) **parental reactions**.

*“The SLT are very conscious of how things will look to parents - and staff do not have clear guidance on the school’s approach so are unclear what they should be doing.”*

*“Parents have raised issues in my borough that have made the head wary. He is nervous. That limits what we do.”*

*“There has been a lot of concern about not wanting to upset religious groups which has led to over caution.”*

*“When an independent school that is financially struggling needs to placate international parents ... SLT are unhappy promoting anything LGBT.”*

In addition, respondents perceived that **non-LGBT+ staff in particular** were less confident to teach inclusive content (this may be particularly significant given that LGBT+ staff are often – inappropriately – expected to lead on and deliver such content). LGBT+ staff also raised concerns about their own **safety and wellbeing and that of students**.

*“The protests have made it more scary for me to consider coming out, especially at a faith school.”*

*“I can only speak for myself and how I feel protests outside of school make it hard for me to be more open with my students.”*

*“The rest of the LGBT staff and I have real stakes in LGBT issues not being swept under the rug as our lives and safety depend on it ... but heterosexual [staff] are not impacted so many won't bother.”*

*“As a bisexual trans man [I find it] troubling and scary.”*

*“[Schools] should be places of safety and sanctuary. Not a place where young LGBT students are instilled with fear about being who they are.”*

- Responses also indicated that **some schools are still delivering little or no LGBT+ inclusive education**. This, taken alongside the fact that others have actually increased provision, suggests a worrying polarising effect with ‘reluctant’ schools becoming even more so and, consequently, pupils experiencing widely variable levels of content and support.

*“There does seem to be more of a pandering from school leadership using protest as a default excuse as to why LGBTQ+ education is not more embedded in the curriculum.”*

*“Currently there is very, very little inclusive education, so there is little [for protests] to affect!”*

*“SLT haven't had to change as they avoid it being taught in school anyway.”*

### **In conclusion...**

- Protests have had an impact on both LGBT+ curriculum content and schools' confidence to deliver it in a number of schools.
- The main causes of this perceived reduction in confidence are anxious senior leaders and parents who are against LGBT+ inclusive education.
- Where schools were already delivering little or no LGBT+ content, protests may have made this situation less likely to improve.



## Teacher interviews: effective approaches to developing LGBT+ inclusive education

In the following sections, we report on conversations with a number of teachers who have been delivering effective LGBT+ inclusive education, some for many years, including their experiences developing relationships with parents and communities to address concerns. Half of them were also involved in the original No Outsiders project (see above). We also examine the perspectives of members of diverse Muslim communities, including LGBT+ Muslims. Together they point a way forward to help all schools become equally welcoming to everyone, including LGBT+ pupils and parents, and address all forms of discrimination.

We begin by looking at the themes emerging from the interview data and then offer a range of recommendations based on this feedback. It goes without saying that every school is unique and we hope that there will be something here that everyone will find useful. In that regard, it is important to note that the schools in which the interview respondents worked and continue to work are themselves diverse in character and serve children and families from a broad range of backgrounds.

For clarity, we have broken the findings down into two key areas, looking first at overcoming objections to LGBT+ inclusive education and then at the effectiveness of such education itself.

### 1. Overcoming objections to LGBT+ inclusive education

Contrary to the media's recent heavy focus on Muslim parents and communities, our interviewees recounted experiences of receiving objections **from people of diverse faiths and of no particular faith**. As a Head teacher recounts:

*"I remember this middleclass, articulate, lefty, parent coming in, squirming in my office saying, oh, you know, obviously, we're fully supportive of this work, but, actually, I spoke to my friend whose a lesbian and she agrees with me that we're not that happy about our son [playing a role in a play based on a children's book about two princes who get married]."*

*"There was another child who was desperate to be one of the princes and we spoke to the mum who said, well, his dad would be absolutely livid if he did it, but he's not coming out of jail for another seven or eight years so I'm really happy, and all the family came along to the preview, and it was great".*

There were also instances of support from religious families and colleagues. (It is worth noting that the first school to join the original No Outsiders project was a Church of England school whose Head signed up precisely because of her view that homophobia was 'unchristian'.)

A number of interviews felt **that faith was sometimes used as a veil to disguise and justify discrimination**. As a Head teacher and teacher explain:

*"It would have been more from a, kind of, fear, ignorance or assumption, that gay men were paedophiles ... it would be that sort of thing that I was battling rather than a religious objection".*

*"It has always seemed to me that people from a religious point of view have kind of used it as a weapon and as something to hide their bigotry behind, you know, rather than actually following the teachings of the bible, the main message of which is love thy neighbour. The*

*message of the bible is, at least the bible that I know, is not love thy neighbour except if they're black or divorced or Asian or gay or whatever".*

Others pointed out that objections often came from communities who were used to seeing **their values being attacked and voices going unheard**. As two interviewees explain:

*"I grew up in a similar working-class community where there are high rates of unemployment and a lack of engagement with social services. And it's not easy because people have these learnt cultural biases and experiences. Within that area, there are high rates of racism as well - it's very segregated, it's very much Them and Us."*

*"When you have got a faith that is deeply entrenched in the family and the culture ... when you say or do something that makes them question their faith or is perceived as an insult to their faith, you're insulting the entirety of their life, their family, their culture, the whole thing."*

Some respondents also felt that the **protests from Muslim communities were given greater prominence in the press** and elsewhere – perhaps as a result of Islamophobia – and that more positive responses often went unreported. For instance, as two LGBT+ identified Muslim interviewees highlight:

*"It's not just Muslims and I'm saying that as a gay Muslim, I know it's definitely not just Muslims. But I guess that brings back to what I was saying [about] how Muslims have been targeted with other sort of things, because it's just a minority, it's not a majority."*

*"But I didn't see the opposition, the people that were [in favour of] having the education within schools. That for me was just within my own friendship circle."*

When discussing how best to avoid or respond to protests, teachers and other interviewees spoke about the importance of **developing trust between school and families** and being thoughtful about how LGBT+ education is presented and framed.

Teachers generally agreed that the relationship between school and parents was vital – and that progress was always easier when trust already existed. Although LGBT+ inclusive education is supported by both legislation and government guidance, some felt that **compassion and understanding** were more helpful tools in when presenting the work to parents.

Others cited the importance of **clarity and consistency** and all staff being confident to discuss and explain LGBT+ inclusive education. As two teachers explain:

*"We came up as a staff with a mantra, so it was very much, you know, we believe in equality in our school and we teach about different families, we teach about everybody in the world, and that includes LGBT+ people because they make up our community as well."*

*"I've actually stopped including bits about [the Birmingham protests] in my training because it just puts people off. We just have a general discussion around the barriers that might come up and how, as a school, we're going to tackle them - and how we can introduce this work in a way that is palatable for the parents and the wider community?"*

While many felt that it should not be the starting point for dialogue between schools and parents, teachers were also clear that being confident to explain the school's **legal responsibilities** is also important.

*“I’ve got no problem with showing parents what the law says: ‘this is something the law says I must do. How are we going to do it so that I follow the law, your child hears from somebody that you know and trust, and that you feel your views are respected?’ ”*

Interviewees agreed that introducing LGBT+ education across the whole school needs to include time for **dialogue between parents and school** to take place. For instance, as a teacher argued:

*“I think that shows the parents that you’re ready to listen. It’s going to take time. And you’ve got to be prepared for that because the parents have got to learn to trust you. But if you consult and listen to people’s views and show them the respect, you know [some are] going to disagree with you. Alright. But you might change one mind by listening, by showing respect.*

*[After all] children will be talking about it with the internet and the communication [they] have with each other [so I ask parents] where would you rather they heard it from? Me - and I’ll be there tomorrow and I’ll listen and respect your cultural views as well - or the Internet that doesn’t know you and doesn’t give a damn anyway?*

*You cannot just expect people whose lives and values you are confronting to go along with it. And you’ve got to be understanding of somebody’s culture. You’ve got to be understanding of their feelings. And if you want to change their reactions to something, you’ve got to show them some respect and then they will change if they are respected.”*

Citing the value of knowing and engaging with parents, one Head teacher spoke of how parents rallied round when a national newspaper attempted to cause controversy about LGBT+ inclusive education.

*“I remember at that point a group of parents coming and saying, well, we know we’re in this project, and if they want a fight then we’re going to give them a fight.”*

It is unrealistic to imagine that any school will be able to ensure that every parent will be completely comfortable with LGBT+ inclusive education, and teachers discussed a range of strategies for **holding a balance between competing views**. This may be particularly important when supporting families who struggle to reconcile LGBT+ inclusion with deeply held cultural or religious beliefs.

*“So, I said, you’re right, there’s different ideas about this and that’s the best thing about living in the UK - we can talk about this stuff. We might end up disagreeing, but we can still have respect for each other, we can still get along.”*

*“With [individual] families if they have got issues, we would address them ... have a meeting, talk about it individually and avoid that whole collective thing.”*

Some respondents cited how **misinformation** lay behind some of the objections, thus highlighting the need to be open with parents about what LGBT+ education involved. As a member of Hidayah<sup>4</sup> and two teachers reflect:

*"I just wonder if the families really knew what was involved properly at the start, and I think it might just have been blown out of context. I mean, one of my members who lives in Birmingham said his parents actually thought that they were going to show, like, a sex tape. I mean, that's how ill-informed the community was, they couldn't grasp what was going to be taught to the children. That was the issue as well."*

*"I made a big display of all the books and I printed out all the lesson activities and made a display in the entrance area of the school, so that any parent could see what we were doing".*

*"I tell [reception class parents] that we're going to read a range of stories in which there'll be lots and lots of different families because that's what we see represented across the nation and across the world".*

The importance of openness was frequently stressed by teachers as a means of **preventing misunderstandings**.

*"I mean, obviously a child's gone home and said, we did a lesson on talking about gay people or whatever she may have said. And then the parent, I think their objection is how [is it] being dealt with, so it was then presented back to the parent that obviously it was in the context of discrimination. But, yeah, that was basically it."*

*"I think there's still this ridiculous idea that you're going to teach, you're going to read a book to kids and they're going to all of a sudden turn gay, you know."*

As a member of Hidayah explained:

*"What we did as an organisation, we spoke to the leaders of these community groups, and the schools [and I] said, look I'm nearly 40 years old and I'm gay and Muslim. I never had inclusive education, in fact inclusive education would've helped me reconcile my sexuality and my faith. I wouldn't have gone down the self-harming route that I went down if I knew that being gay was acceptable and that, you know, my feelings are valid. And, I said, in fact, not having that education had a detrimental effect on me.*

*Sexuality generally isn't talked about within the community and here you have people standing up and saying, well, actually I'm gay and Muslim and I think it's important we do have education. I remember one woman during our discussions turned round to me and said, I came in with a really negative view on inclusive education but I appreciate the difficulties you've experienced in your life."*

Interviewees generally agreed that LGBT+ inclusive education should be delivered as part of a wider focus on **equality, respect and human rights**. However, reflecting the diversity of their schools, teachers had a range of views on how the manner in which this work is delivered can affect how it is received by parents. For example, there were differing opinions expressed as to **whether**

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<sup>4</sup> Hidayah is a queer Muslim charity. <https://hidayahlgbt.com/>; accessed 2 June 2023.

## **LGBT+ identities should be celebrated or whether the focus should be on tolerance and acceptance.** As two interviewees recall:

*"I remember reading in one of the articles like a parent saying we have no problem with the curriculum, but we just don't want LGBT to be celebrated, rather we'd like to be informed and to accept the LGBT community."*

*"I've even taken out the word 'celebrate' actually, I don't celebrate diversity because we don't need to, I haven't got to celebrate LGBT."*

In contrast, one LGBT+ identified Muslim interviewee noted the importance of identities being not just accepted but positively endorsed.

*"For kids identity [it] would be really important because you can't imagine how difficult it must be to struggle with your identity and not even really have anyone acknowledge that or tell you that it's normal."*

Another LGBT+ identified Muslim offered this response to those who struggle to accept LGBT+ education and identities.

*"You don't have to be accepting but that doesn't mean that you have to vocalise what you feel in a bad way to people under that spectrum. So at least with having that awareness, they would keep it to themselves and they would understand that, okay, wait a minute, this is normal. I may not agree with it, but it's normal and because of that, I'm not going to say anything."*

It goes without saying that schools that feel unable to actively embrace LGBT+ education will also feel less welcoming to LGBT+ pupils, staff and families (we discuss this in greater detail below).

Some staff noted **the value for the whole school of LGBT+ staff feeling safe to be as open about their identity** as everyone else.

*"If there are teachers in a school that can be openly gay that completely changes the conversations, it completely changes everything. Because then there's nothing hidden, there are things to acknowledge, whether that's through the formal curriculum or if it's just through conversations with a class."*

*"Sometimes you get a parent saying, oh I'm glad my child's had a gay teacher because you're the only gay person he's ever met, and he needs to".*

## 2. Delivering effective LGBT+ inclusive education

Interviewees also highlighted aspects of both the content and context of LGBT+ inclusive education which can impact on its effectiveness as well as its acceptability to some parents.

**The original No Outsiders project (2006 – 2008)** identified two key ‘starting points’ to discussing LGBT+ relationships with children:

- talking about ‘different’ (i.e. same-sex parented) families and
- anti-bullying (linked to acceptance and respect).

To this day, these remain the basis for much work on sexualities and gender inclusion in primary schools. To this has been added a focus on stereotypes as another means of opening discussions about gender.

These three approaches all have advantages – but, increasingly, teachers and researchers have become aware of their limitations as well. For example

- In a world in which LGBT+ characters regularly appear on children’s TV, focusing on ‘some families having two mums and two dads’ as the main vehicle for discussing same-sex relationships is increasingly limiting and unrepresentative of the breadth of LGBT+ identities – nor does it offer much in the way of validation to young LGBT+ people exploring their own identities or the kinds of relationships they might want to have in the future.
- The ‘we can all agree that bullying is wrong’ approach – while difficult for even those opposed to LGBT+ inclusive education to challenge – tends to present LGBT+ people as victims or, at best, cast conversations in a negative light. Crucially it is also unpopular with young LGBT+ people who report that it can often actually lead to more bullying.
- Addressing gender stereotypes is vital as a means of improving the life chances of all children but, if used as the only or main vehicle for LGBT+ education, can often mean that this element gets ‘lost in the mix’. Such an approach may even be used as a ‘cover’ for schools who don’t want to explicitly address LGBT+ identities at all.

See **Resources** for original No Outsiders publications.

In this section we look at themes that emerge from the interviews around different approaches to LGBT+ education and, as with the previous section, offer suggestions in the final recommendations about which approaches might be most effective in different circumstances.

One of the key approaches used in the ‘original’ (2006 – 2008) No Outsiders project was a focus on **talking about same-sex parents**. Families already form the basis of much discussion around relationships at KS1 and 2 and this methodology was subsequently adopted by Stonewall and others and remains popular. And, of course, children with two mums or two dads are present in nearly every school and need to have their families endorsed as much as any other.

However, this and other research has also highlighted that, while widely viewed as a ‘safe option’, focusing ‘just’ on ‘gay mums and dads’ still presents challenges as well as opportunities. On the plus side, there are now many children’s books and other resources which include such families, but those interviewed for this research also highlighted some of the limitations of this approach.

*"I think one of the main things at a primary school is the conversation about different families. So we all went away and taught a lesson on that and, you know, I did the lesson and it involved talking about families with two dads and that inevitably becomes a questioning point for the children. [But] I think this needs to be [just] the beginning, this needs to be a journey of actually really beefing it up, you know".*

While this approach can be helpful in 'usualising' (see **Recommendations** below) the existence of same-sex families, if delivered as a single lesson or without sufficient clarity, it can also be tokenistic. If two mums or dads are only ever there in the background but never foregrounded, they may go unnoticed or, unless asked directly, children may not even identify them as a same-sex couple - thus ensuring that LGBT+ identities remain, effectively, invisible. As a teacher explains:

*"Children with two mums or dads - I think it needs to be explicitly taught as well as incidentally so it just becomes part of the norm."*

Several interviewees spoke about the significance of the conventional 'nuclear' family within Islamic culture. This suggests that an exclusive focus on same-sex headed families might not be the most helpful or effective approach and that others – such as encouraging pupils and families to unite around rights-respecting narratives – might be more effective. We explore this further in the recommendations below.

*"I could definitely see that cooking up a massive storm in a Muslim household. That's such a core element within Muslim families. Even me as a gay man, if I learnt that [some children have same-sex parents] at a primary school age even I would find that quite strange to get my head around. Even I would find that quite alien to start with. It would be challenging to put across to parents as well as children."*

*"So for a lot of people that I know, they don't mind, or let's say, their objections are lessened to letting their children know that LGBT exists. It's the idea of portraying, say, two men in a loving home with an adopted child that is, like, no, not happening."*

*"For some people in the Muslim community adoption is something that's ... it's not allowed. And so that's the first thing they think of, they feel sorry for their [LGBT+] child that they won't have their own children. Yeah, they're sad that their children won't have the normal nuclear family."*

Interviewees also had contrasting views on using **anti-bullying** work as the main vehicle for LGBT+ inclusive education. (It is worth noting here that, while government has allocated specific funding for work on homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying in recent years, the most effective practice developed by organisations as a result of this has always had a broader focus than 'simply' addressing bullying). As a Head teacher and two teachers explain:

*"I think one of the things that everybody always seems okay with is doing things to prevent homophobic bullying."*

*"The point is saying this is a way of living, this is the way some people live and let's just acknowledge it and celebrate it as well as we celebrate all other aspects of diversity. If you [only include LGBT+] as part of bullying work, it's not the same thing, it's not equalities work to me".*

*"I mean if that was the only way that this work could be done, then it would be quite a negative way, you know. Oh, look at the gays, they're having such a bad time of it. We can't*

*bully them because they're gay. You know, that sort of pity and shame and all that, that negative stuff."*

As well as concerns about presenting LGBT+ people as 'victims', teachers also identified that (only) challenging bullying won't necessarily effect the more significant changes in attitudes that promote genuine inclusion.

*"I think it is an easy default thing, isn't it? We have got that anti-bullying thing, yes, anti-bullying policy, yes, yes, got that, brilliant, yes, yes, yes. Rather than systemic meaningful change which is based on respect and diversity".*

The original No Outsiders project also predated the Equality Act which recognises sexual orientation and gender reassignment as 'protected' characteristics and is regularly cited by schools as a driver for work on LGBT+ inclusion. More recently, schools have been required to promote **'British Values'** and work on LGBT+ education has also been delivered in this context:

*"We used the Ofsted definition of British values, so tolerance of different faiths and beliefs and mutual respect."*

However, a number of interviewees saw problems with this approach, noting that, given the distaste for 'British Values' – and the Prevent Duty to which they are linked – among some communities, explicitly relating LGBT+ inclusive education to them may raise additional concerns.

*"Using British Values could very easily be misconstrued as something that was racist and far right and all that kind of stuff."*

*"I largely ignore the British Values thing ... we already had a set of core values that we had spent a long time developing as a school, and I just thought it was more appropriate for our context than the jingoistic, kind of, thing that it became."*

The language of 'British Values' itself is also potentially unhelpful – not least, the focus on 'mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths or beliefs'. There is no explicit mention of sexual orientation or gender identity in the guidance, and this has been used by some to challenge the positive discussion of LGBT+ people as being 'disrespectful' to people of faith. As a teacher explains:

*"The argument was that 'our children shouldn't have to do this because they're Muslim children and in our religion it's not okay, we don't want children to listen to this'. And then religious freedom coming up against all the other equalities."*

Another challenge that staff identified is both the nature and paucity of 'official' guidance available. While government guidance (see the Introduction for more on this) states that LGBT+ inclusive RE and RSE should be 'age appropriate', it gives no indication of what that age might be. Schools are obliged to consult with parents – although, again no information is provided as to how schools should address negative responses. The guidance also states that 'the religious background of all pupils must be taken into account'. In some cases, teachers reported that this has hindered rather than helped LGBT+ inclusive education.

*"The school are really worried. The lessons about different families, we were told not to have that, even though we'd done it the year before, we were told to postpone anything like that while this consultation's going on."*

*"When is it 'age appropriate' to talk about having two mums and what if a child has two mums in Reception?"*



## Recommendations

In this section, we make some recommendations drawing on the learning from the research discussed above. Again, we have divided these into two sections – broadly,

- considering how objections to LGBT+ inclusive education can be overcome
- looking at different, widely employed approaches to LGBT+ inclusive education, where these might be appropriate and how they can be used most effectively.

None of these recommendations are mutually exclusive, and all could be part of a developmental approach. Schools should consider what might be easily achievable as well as developing more long term aims for ensuring that their curriculum and other provision is fully inclusive.

### Three general points first –

- Avoid presenting LGBT+ inclusive education as ‘sensitive’ or ‘controversial’ as this is only likely to increase concerns. Discuss it as one part of the schools’ work on inclusion, diversity, RSE etc. If others single it out, remind them that the school is concerned that all families should feel included and that children should understand that all forms of discrimination (whether or not we agree with a particular identity or point of view) are unacceptable.
- In this context, while parents are free to say what they like at home, the school should teach that all legally endorsed relationships and identities are equally acceptable.
- As you would with any other area of inclusion, avoid ‘one off’ lessons and ensure that LGBT+ identities are present throughout the curriculum – just as you would seek include, for example, a range of ethnic and faith identities and people with different abilities. In this regard, remember that children of all ages have LGBT+ parents or family members so they need to see these identities included in all stages of their education – and all other children need to know that they are acceptable.

## 1. Building support for LGBT+ inclusive education

- Teachers and others involved in the research agreed that **establishing trust and encouraging dialogue** are vital in gaining support for LGBT+ inclusive education.
- In terms of how they presented the work to parents, schools took **a number of approaches** – some championed a focus on LGBT+ inclusion as a key part of their work to promote equality, others took a more matter-of-fact approach, talking about their responsibility to teach the facts about diverse families, relationships and identities as an element of preparing children for life. Consider what would work best in your school.
- **Avoid presenting LGBT+ education as challenging or sensitive** – rather, focus on considerations such as kindness and acceptance. Discuss the work in the broad context of all that the school does to teach about families and relationships or promote equality.
- While much of the work on LGBT+ inclusion will take place outside of the school’s planned RSE provision (see below), **use RSE consultations to discuss why LGBT+**

**education is important** and to convey consistent messages about how inclusion will be reinforced via teaching and pastoral support. For example, be clear about how and why the school challenges all forms of discrimination including homophobic, biphobic and transphobic (HBT) bullying. Use a range of strategies - one off meetings, focus groups, presentations of pupils' work, questionnaires and, where necessary, meetings with individuals.

- **Explain what you are doing and why you are doing it.** Provide accurate information and be clear about the school's position on equality, diversity and its legal responsibilities to support all pupils and all families including those with a range of identities and beliefs. For example, clarify that conversations about LGBT+ people focus on relationships rather than sexual activity – but also be clear that they are part of all societies and as welcome at your school as everyone else.
- **Challenge misconceptions but try to avoid arguments about beliefs.** For example, point out that there is no evidence that talking about LGBT+ people is likely to lead to children becoming LGBT+. On the other hand, rather than debating whether 'homosexuality is a choice' it may be better to point out that, whether or not that is the case, it is a choice that people are entitled to make and still be fully accepted by society.
- If necessary, remind people that same-sex relationships, equal marriage and gender reassignment are **protected in law** and that public institutions, including schools, need to reflect this.
- As you would with children, ask adults to **consider how expressing negative opinions might make LGBT+ people, their families and friends feel.** Can we agree to disagree and not share our views in ways which might cause others to feel unhappy, unwelcome or afraid?
- Schools should always bear in the mind the **impact of discussions on LGBT+ adults.** Consider the impact on LGBT+ colleagues and parents of, in effect, having their identities up for debate. Ensure that LGBT+ staff are not expected to act as standard bearers for LGBT+ inclusive education or as representatives for a community.
- **Support all staff to ensure that school's approach is consistent.** Offer CPD and other opportunities for staff to ask questions and agree on key areas such as appropriate language and responding to challenges.
- **Ensure that provision is consistent, developmental and embedded** as a planned programme of work across the whole curriculum. A key learning point from No Outsiders and other studies of LGBT+ inclusive education has been the importance of including age-appropriate content at all stages. For example, discussing the diversity of family groups (including same-sex parents) and challenging stereotypes about gender should begin in reception while other areas – such LGBT+ relationships, gender diversity and LGBT+ human rights – can introduced at later stages.
- Remember that some children (particularly in KS2) **may already be identifying as LGBT+.** Everyone has the right to receive positive messages about their emerging

identities – not just those who will grow up to be heterosexual or cisgender. Ensure that conversations about puberty, relationships, sexual health, consent and other issues are relevant to all children. Check that that teaching does not give the impression that heterosexual and cisgender people are more ‘normal’ – for example, by regularly including LGBT+ examples in discussions about relationships.

- As well as including LGBT+ inclusive content in **PSHE and RSE** at all stages, encourage staff to think about how messages can be reinforced through, for example, **literacy lessons, assemblies or P4C discussions**.

## Pause and reflect – what do you hope to achieve?

As a starting point – or as part of ongoing planning – schools may find it helpful to consider identifying some **broad aims for LGBT+ inclusive education**. This could be thought of in terms of how the school might ‘feel’ to others in terms of its approach and could range from an atmosphere of tolerance to one of celebration. This could also be part of a developmental approach, particularly when trying to strike a balance between opposing views. Teachers interviewed discussed a range of options, for example:

- Tolerance – this should be the minimum requirement for any school and would include consistent and appropriate responses to HBT bullying and a commitment to basic equality – for example, agreement not to express negative views about LGBT+ identities and relationships since heterosexual and cisgender people do not have to listen to such comments. This approach is unlikely to affect underlying negative attitudes or help LGBT+ pupils, parents and staff to feel welcome at the school. Is it fair, for example, to expect LGBT+ staff simply to ‘agree to disagree’ about the acceptability of their identity and relationships?
- Awareness – this might include teaching the facts about legal protections for LGBT+ people as part of work on equality and diversity, using books which feature LGBT+ parents in literacy work and ensuring that same-sex relationships are included in PSHE and RSE. This will ensure that schools are meeting most basic statutory requirements and is likely to be accepted as a compromise by many. However, it is unlikely to impact significantly on established negative attitudes or, in particular, provide much support for children who may go on to question their own identities but are not able to seek support or advice at home.
- Acceptance – a school where LGBT+ people are widely accepted and included throughout the curriculum alongside other diverse identities. They are the central focus of some stories and discussions as well as appearing regularly in the ‘background’ of others. New parents and staff are made aware that all families are equally welcome at the school. LGBT+ staff and parents feel comfortable to be as open about their identity as other adults, and pupils understand that LGBT+ identities are as valid as any other. Without judgement, children and adults might be asked to consider not just what is ‘kind’ but also what is ‘fair’ – is it enough not to say unkind things about people if we can’t show equal acceptance of their identity as we do of others?
- Celebration – as part of its focus on diversity and inclusion, the school celebrates national and local LGBT+ Pride and other events. The impact of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia are openly discussed as part of conversations about other forms of prejudice and children, staff and parents are encouraged and supported to act as allies and advocates for LGBT+ people. LGBT+ pupils (and those who go on to identify as such) feel as welcome and safe at school as anyone else and are actively supported to develop resilience and to feel proud of their identities.

Of course, these approaches are not mutually exclusive – for example, an ‘accepting’ school can also create opportunities for some of its members to celebrate LGBT+ identities. Schools should also consider the impact of ‘celebrating’ some aspects of identity and not others – is that likely to create a hierarchy in which some identities are more acceptable than others?

## 2. Delivering effective LGBT+ inclusive education

Teachers involved in the research used a range of **content and approaches** for delivering LGBT+ inclusive education in the classroom. Different approaches may be more or less appropriate for different settings.

- **Talking about families with two mums or two dads.** This is perhaps the most commonly used ‘starting point’ for LGBT+ inclusive education and has a number of advantages. It sits comfortably alongside discussions about families that regularly take place in early years and ensures that children with same-sex parents see their own families included.

However, limiting the discussion of same-sex relationships – especially with older children – to family groups also means that we are failing to include a full range of LGBT+ identities. Not all couples have children and not all adults have a partner. Teaching about relationships, consent, etc. with older children should include same-sex couples, and LGBT+ characters should feature in literature and elsewhere in the curriculum. Discussions with young children about gender stereotyping can be developed with older ones to include concepts such as the fact that some people’s gender identity will not match the sex they were assigned at birth.

Respondents also noted the centrality of the (heteronormative) ‘nuclear’ family for many religious parents. This at least suggests that, far from being the ‘safest’ option, if our only strategy for LGBT+ inclusive education is talking about same-sex parents, then this may actually be more challenging for some people than a more holistic approach which considers the diversity of LGBT+ people and identities as outlined above.

As with all teaching about identity, language is particularly important. Many schools still use the term ‘different’ families – often only with regard to those with LGBT+ parents. In fact, of course, **all** families are different and applying this term only to certain types of family only serves to stress their ‘otherness’. Remember also that not all children with LGBT+ parents live with two mums or two dads – their families are as diverse as any other.

- **LGBT+ inclusive content should be both an explicit and implicit feature of the curriculum.**<sup>5</sup> Seeing same-sex couples and gender diverse characters included in stories about other things can help to ‘usualise’ their existence. (This term, first coined by LGBT+ charity Schools Out, is increasingly used in schools. It is valuable because the alternative, ‘normalise’, can be taken to imply that LGBT+ people are not normal when, in fact, there are simply fewer of them).

However, research has shown that, if they always appear only in the background – in other words, if LGBT+ people are not also discussed explicitly (in books or lessons for example) – then many children may simply fail to notice them. This is, in part, due the heteronormative

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<sup>5</sup> For more on this, see the resource at the link below which discusses a range of books that include LGBT+ people as both the main focus of stories and as ‘background’ characters. Using both is likely to be most effective in ‘usualising’ their inclusion in classroom discussions - <https://neu.org.uk/publications/every-child-every-family>; accessed 2 June 2023.

world we live in that leads many of us to assume that everyone is heterosexual or cisgender unless we told otherwise.<sup>6</sup>

- **Try to avoid only or mainly discussing LGBT+ people and identities in the context of bullying and discrimination.** While often presented as a ‘safe option’, this approach tends to cast LGBT+ people as victims and allows for little positive discussion. Bear in mind as well that it is also likely to be largely ineffective if not accompanied by positive messages about LGBT+ identities. Imagine trying to tackle racism without including diverse and positive representatives of racial minorities in the curriculum.
- **A rights-respecting approach** was favoured by many of the teachers interviewed. This is already taught in many schools so – like discussion of same-sex parents – it fits alongside current practice and, unlike focusing mainly on anti-bullying, allows for the positive representation of LGBT+ people across the curriculum. It also places LGBT+ inclusive education firmly within the framework of equality and human rights which children, staff and parents will be familiar with from other work around diversity.

Areas to explore here could include LGBT+ history (with reference to specific LGBT+ groups and individuals), the involvement of LGBT+ people in civil rights (alongside other groups such as ethnic minority or Disabled people, for example) and the positive developments over recent decades that have brought increasing protection and freedoms for a number of minorities including LGBT+ people.

This approach may also be helpful where, as detailed above, focusing exclusively on same-sex parents may pose challenges for people that hold the conventional, heteronormative family in particularly high esteem.

- **An important aspect of any approach is intersectionality** – include, for example, a range of diverse, inspirational LGBT+ figures to challenge concepts and stereotypes about LGBT+ identities being a White, ‘Western’, middle class or, even, a ‘fashionable’ identity – and make sure that LGBT+ characters in books and examples display a range of other characteristics as well.
- **Involve pupils, staff and parents in developing or exploring your own inclusive school values.** To help create a sense of common identity, consider the rights we all have – including to love and worship how we chose, whether or not other people agree with our choices – and the responsibilities these also entail.

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<sup>6</sup> This article discusses the importance of using a diversity of approaches to LGBT+ inclusive education in more detail - <https://theconversation.com/teaching-primary-school-children-about-lgbt-relationships-is-the-government-taking-the-right-approach-138486>; accessed 2 June 2023.

## Some useful Resources

[AGENDA](#) is a gender diversity-inclusive relationships resources for 7 – 18 year olds.

[Allsorts Youth Project](#) supports children and young people who are LGBT+ or exploring their gender identity and/or sexual orientation. Resources include a Trans Inclusion School Toolkit and a range of material for young people.

[BishUK](#) is an online sex and relationships resource for everyone over 14 of all genders and sexualities.

[\*Celebrating Difference: A whole-school approach to LGBT+ inclusion\*](#) by Dr Shaun Dellenty (2019). London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

[\*Growing up LGBT+: The impact of school, home and coronavirus on LGBT+ young people\*](#). Just Like Us (2021). England: The LGBT+ Young People's Charity.

[Hidayah LGBTQI+](#) – Queer Muslim charity providing resources, support and guidance.

[\*Kings, Princesses, Ducks and Penguins: An easy-to-follow resource for educators to develop knowledge and understanding around gender and sexuality\*](#) by John Yates-Harold (2020). Derby: Derbyshire LGBT+.

[LGBT+ History Month](#) – information about LGBT+ history resources including posters, wallcharts, lesson plans etc.

[Living Gender in Diverse Times: Young People's Understandings, Experiences, and Practices of Gender in the UK – Graphic novel and A briefing for schools, youth service, charities and other third sector organisations working with young people.](#)

[NEU Breaking the Mould](#) resources – support for primary schools and Early Years around promoting LGBT+ inclusion and challenging gender stereotypes. Includes [Every Child, Every Family](#), a resource on using children's' books to promote LGBT+ inclusion.

[\*"Our curriculum needs to be relevant to all young people": Learning from LGBT+ staff across the education sector.\*](#) NEU (2022). London: National Education Union.

[PSHE Association](#) – the national body for PSHE Education.

[\*Relationships and Sex Education: The Evidence.\*](#) SEF (2020). London: Sex Education Forum.

[Sex Education Forum elearning](#) courses on trans inclusion and LGBT+ inclusive Relationships and Sex Education.

[Stonewall](#) is an LGBTQ+ charity providing support, training, and resources for schools.

[\*Teaching primary school children about LGBT+ relationships: is the government taking the right approach?\*](#) by Dr Joe Hall (2020). London: The Conversation.

[The Proud Trust](#) is an LGBT+ youth charity providing support, training, and resources, including [primary resources](#).

[\*"We have to educate ourselves": how young people are learning about relationships, sex and sexuality\*](#) by Professor E.J. Renold et al. (2023). London: NSPCC.

### Original No Outsiders publications<sup>7</sup>

DePalma, R. and Atkinson, E. (ed.) (2008) *Invisible boundaries: addressing sexualities equality in children's worlds*, London: Trentham Books Ltd.

DePalma, R. and Atkinson, E. (2009) (ed.) *Interrogating heteronormativity in Primary Schools: The No Outsiders Project*, Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books Ltd.

Atkinson, E. and DePalma, R. (2010) (eds.) *Undoing Homophobia in Primary Schools*, Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books Ltd.

### Children's books

We discuss above the importance of including diverse, intersectional representations of LGBT+ people as part of teaching. Included below are suggestions for a few titles that include LGBT+ people of colour. We have also included books that address gender diversity and include same-sex couples who are not parents.

Lulu's Sleepover by Anna McQuinn and Rosalind Beardshaw

Bathe The Cat by Alice B. McGinty and David Roberts

Grandad's Camper by Harry Woodgate

Nen And The Lonely Fisherman by Ian Eagleton and James Mayhew

Super Duper You by Sophy Henn

Jamie by Olly Pike

Julian Is A Mermaid and Julian At The Wedding by Jessica Love

Calvin by JR and Vanessa Ford and Kayla Harren

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<sup>7</sup> Please note that these books are now out of print, but still in circulation.





