

# The why, how and when of LGBT+ education.

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## Abstract

This novel study undergraduate study explores the current practice in mainstream English primary schools regarding the delivery of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender plus (LGBT+) education, whether primary school teachers feel confident delivering this content and considers the best ways to teach primary school children LGBT+ content and become LGBT+ inclusive. With the ongoing changes in policy and law regarding LGBT+ matters and the recent introduction of Department for Education (2019) guidance on relationships education, this is a contemporary topic that contributes to the field by discussing the issues and opportunities arising within English primary schools.

This study used a mixed methods approach- a combination of questionnaires and interviews- to gather data from 58 primary school teachers. This research identified that English primary school teachers felt that LGBT+ education should first be delivered in Reception and Year 1. The main areas that impact teachers' confidence are worries about parental opposition and the lack of training and suitable resources. The most effective strategies to teach this content are shared including learning opportunities such as circle time. It is also noted that primary school teachers would benefit from a scheme on this topic of work to teach from.

Key words: Primary school, LGBT+, Relationships and Sex Education, Teacher training, RHSE, Equality and Diversity

As part of this study Hannah created a glossary of terminology to support teachers and to support the reading of this article.

## Glossary

<i>Binary</i>	A way to describe the contested idea that gender is exclusively male or female.
<sup>1</sup> <i>Biphobia</i>	Fear, dislike or mistreatment of bisexual people resulting in prejudice towards them.
<i>Bisexual</i>	A person who has romantical, emotional and/or physical attraction towards more than one gender.
<i>Cisgender</i>	Someone whose gender identity is the same as the sex they were assigned with at birth.
<sup>2</sup> <i>Gay</i>	A person who identifies as male who is romantically, emotionally and/or physically attracted to another person who identifies as male. Also, a generic term for lesbian and gay sexuality.
<sup>3</sup> <i>Gender Identity</i>	A person's internal sense of their own gender. This could be male, female, or something else.
<i>Heteroactivism</i>	An activism which upholds heterosexual and cisgender identities as superior in society.

<i>Heterosexual</i>	The state of being attracted to the opposite gender within a binary model of gender which understands the existence of male and female only.
<sup>1</sup> <i>Homophobia</i>	Fear, dislike or mistreatment of gay people resulting in prejudice towards them.
<i>Homosexual</i>	Another term for 'gay' or 'lesbian'.
<sup>4</sup> <i>Lesbian</i>	A person who identifies as female who is romantically, emotionally and/or physically attracted to another person who identifies as female.
<i>LGBT</i>	Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender
<i>LGBT+</i>	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, plus other associated categories such as queer, questioning, intersex and asexual.
<i>Non-binary</i>	The term used to describe a person who does not identify as exclusively male or female.
<sup>5</sup> <i>Pronoun</i>	Words used to refer to a person's gender, which some people prefer to be in a gender-neutral language. For example, 'he', 'she' or 'they'.
<i>Protected Characteristics</i>	A characteristic which it is unlawful to discriminate a person because of. These include sex, race, disability, religion or belief, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, pregnancy or maternity.
<i>Queer</i>	An umbrella term for anyone who identifies within the gender identity or sexual orientation spectrum.
<i>Transgender</i>	The term used to describe a person who identifies as a different gender to the one they were assigned at birth.
<sup>1</sup> <i>Transphobia</i>	Fear, dislike or mistreatment of transgender people resulting in prejudice towards them.

Glossary created based on information drawn from: Department for Education, 2014a, p.8; Barnes and Carlile, 2018, pp.129-134; Nash and Browne, 2021, p.74; Stonewall, 2022, pp.36-40

## Introduction

Despite changes in the National Curriculum, the LGBT+ community and associated laws, it is still not compulsory for LGBT+ content to be taught in primary schools (Department for Education (DfE), 2019a, p.15; DfE, 2019b). This causes conflict for school leaders in deciding how and when to teach LGBT+ education in primary schools and an inconsistent approach regarding LGBT+ content and teaching (DfE, 2019a, p.15; Glazzard and Stones, 2020, p.2).

This discordance raises issues regarding what should and should not be taught in primary schools, from the perspectives of both teachers and parents; the matter of an LGBT+ inclusive curriculum is becoming a controversial topic. Opposition includes promoting being LGBT+ as a way of life and that LGBT+ content does not align with certain religious beliefs (Glazzard and Stones, 2020, p.101). Whereas Stonewall (2019) conversely state that an effective LGBT+ inclusive curriculum helps to reduce anti-LGBT+ bullying and encourages pupils to feel confident and comfortable in themselves.

This study aims to contribute to the field of primary education and inclusive practices by discussing when and how LGBT+ education is being taught and what primary school teachers need to feel confident in teaching LGBT+ content.

## Research Questions

- What are English primary school teachers' perspectives of the appropriate age for children to be taught LGBT+ content?
- What factors influence English primary school teachers' confidence in teaching LGBT+ content to their class?

- If LGBT+ content is taught in a primary school, what are the teachers' perspectives on the most effective strategies used?

## Review of Literature

According to LGBT+ charity 'Stonewall', almost half of LGBT+ pupils are bullied during their schooling, between 36% and 52% of LGBT+ pupils hear <sup>1</sup>homophobic, <sup>1</sup>biphobic or <sup>1</sup>transphobic language in school, and the majority of LGBT+ pupils regularly hear the word <sup>2</sup>'gay' used as a pejorative term (Stonewall, 2019, p.3). Snapp *et al.*, (2015) found that in schools where LGBT+ content is taught, bullying is less likely, and that pupils feel safer and happier at school.

Approximately ten percent of people in the United Kingdom (UK) identify as LGBT+, in 2016 it was estimated that roughly 20,000 children lived with same-sex parents or carers, and in 2019 there were 212,000 same-sex families in the UK (Barnes and Carlile, 2018, p.66). Therefore, effectively representing LGBT+ families, teachers, and children, who are or may become LGBT+ demonstrates that this is normal and valued, empowering children to make educated choices (Price and Tayler, 2015, p.17). Children will encounter LGBT+ people within society, hear about LGBT+ matters on the news and know of LGBT+ celebrities (Glazzard and Stones, 2020, p.97).

Teachers' sexuality or identity is something that may arise in discussions with pupils, this helps to develop a rapport with their pupils, or the use of their pronouns (Barnes and Carlile, 2018, p.24). For a teacher who identifies as LGBT+, this can create an element of anxiety as to whether it is appropriate for them to have a discussion which discloses their sexuality or identity. Many LGBT+ teachers, particularly those aged over forty, do not feel able to be themselves when in school (Gray, 2013, p.704). However, when schools are LGBT+ inclusive, this creates a much safer and comfortable environment for LGBT+ staff members and enables them to become diverse role models for pupils (Ferfolia and Hopkins, 2013, cited in Neary, 2020, p.19)

Due to sexual orientation and <sup>3</sup>gender identity being controversial topics, schools can often become a battleground for disputes over the LGBT+ content that they include in Relationships, Social and Health Education (RSHE) or other areas of the curriculum or school life (Glazzard and Stones, 2020, p.1; Nash and Browne, 2021, p.87). One of the main oppositions to LGBT+ content being taught in school is from religious organisations, and as seen in the media, many faith groups argue that it is inappropriate, would exploit children's innocence, and would promote ways of life that oppose their beliefs (Glazzard and Stones, 2020, p.104; Nash and Browne, 2021, p.85). However, when the RSHE curriculum was introduced in 2019, stating that primary schools can choose to teach about LGBT matters, it was also stated that they must consider the religious background of pupils. This put schools in a difficult position in deciding what is appropriate to teach (Glazzard and Stones, 2020, p.2).

Despite this, schools have a legal duty to teach pupils about respect and to safeguard pupils and families of protected characteristics under the Equality Act, 2010 (Glazzard and Stones, 2020, p.101) and a legal obligation to consult with parents and carers regarding their curriculum and policies (Jones, 2021). To be able to discuss the curriculum competently and confidently with parents and carers, teachers need to be clear of what they are teaching and why (Glazzard and Stones, 2020, p.101). However, many teachers report that they do not feel confident in

teaching LGBT+ content, and in 2019, 47% percent of primary and secondary teachers stated that they did not feel confident delivering the new RSHE curriculum (National Education Union, 2019; Jones, 2021).

This lack of confidence is due to unclear guidance, being unsure which resources are appropriate, and a lack of training, therefore causing a significant barrier to teaching LGBT+ effectively (Barnes and Carlile, 2018, p.33; Jones, 2021). Conversely, when teachers have received specific LGBT+ training and training on managing anti-LGBT+ bullying, they feel much more confident to support pupils (Goodboy and Martin, 2018, p.514).

Using LGBT+ literature is effective in reducing anti-LGBT+ bullying and in eliminating the use of words such as 'gay' and 'lesbian' as insults through helping pupils to understand the correct use of them (Page, 2017, p.2; DePalma, 2018, p.9). However, using books as a standalone device to teach LGBT+ content does not specifically address LGBT+ issues or create an inclusive curriculum (Page, 2017, p.11). Stonewall (2019) suggests many ways that schools can embed LGBT+ content into the curriculum: teaching about LGBT+ role models in subjects such as science and art, creating word problems in mathematics that involve LGBT+ people, and including the Pride festival when teaching about festivals in religious education (Barnes and Carlile, 2018, p.33; Stonewall, 2019, pp.14-34).

For a school to be fully LGBT+ inclusive, what is embedded within the curriculum should also be reflected in the school environment and values (Barnes and Carlile, 2018, p.39). Displays are considered an influential way to convey an inclusive message to pupils, staff, parents and visitors, and resources used across the school can provide pupils with a balanced view of the world (Price and Tayler, 2015, pp.74-80; Barnes and Carlile, 2018, pp.66-83). The language staff use is pertinent in not excluding any identity or family type and not portraying gender stereotypes, and school policy has a significant role in LGBT+ inclusion, as this reflects the values a school upholds regarding LGBT+ inclusion and what they do to manage bullying and discrimination (DfE, 2019a, p.11; Stonewall, 2019, p.10).

A common viewpoint among advocates of LGBT+ inclusive education is that children as young as four should learn LGBT+ content as they are likely to know LGBT+ people within some aspect of life, and the National Curriculum is a key document that does not represent LGBT+ people (Glazzard and Stones, 2020, p.2) and school leaders are still not clear on what should and should not be taught at each age (Jones, 2021).

## **Methodology**

This study used an online questionnaire given to all participants via opportunity sampling, in this case – 58 primary school teachers from a range of schools across England and years Reception through to Year 6. Due to the nature of the research, participants were asked to disclose their gender identities and sexualities so that it could be identified whether this influenced their responses. From this, it was identified that twenty-six percent of participants identified as a sexuality that was not heterosexual, and two percent of participants did not identify as the gender they were assigned with at birth.

To also allow for more interpretivist responses, one-to-one semi structured interviews were used. These participants were of a range of ages, worked in different year groups and all identified differently by gender and sexuality.

Interviews were transcribed and a process of inductive coding was used, which involved categorising the data into different themes or labels so that patterns can be identified, examined and discussed (Cohen *et al.*, 2018, p.645). The same approach was used to code the qualitative data from the open questionnaire questions (Figure 1).

Ethical guidance from BERA (2018) was used and ethical approval given by the University of Northampton and considered aspects such as consent, withdrawal, confidentiality and the safe storage of data (Cohen *et al.*, 2018, p.111). As well as these key ethical considerations, several other ethical aspects were important due to the nature of the topic, such as the sensitivity of the topic, limiting bias alongside actions to be taken in the case of ethical dilemmas.

<b>Primary Coding</b>	Identified themes				
<b>Age appropriateness</b>	EYFS/ KS1	KS2	Reflective of children’s lives		
<b>Confidence</b>	Confidence	Terminology	Parental/ colleague conflict	Training	
<b>Strategies</b>	School wide practices	Story books	School values	PHSE/ RSE	Integrated curriculum

Figure 1: Inductive coding themes from interviews and open questions.

## Findings

This section will now address the findings linked to the research questions.

### What are English Primary school teachers’ perspectives of the appropriate age for children to be taught LGBT+ content?

66% of schools in this study currently teach LGBT+ content, 16% do not teach LGBT+ content and the remaining 18% of participants were unsure of whether LGBT+ content was taught in their school. Those participants who stated that LGBT+ content was taught in their school then answered a follow-up question, which indicated which year group LGBT+ content begins to be taught in.

The uncertainty that schools have regarding the practice that takes place in their school regarding LGBT+ education is reflected in the data as 38% of participants were unsure of the year group that LGBT+ content begins to be taught. From the remainder of the data, there is a varied spread of the year group where teaching of LGBT+ content begins, however, 24% of teachers stated that LGBT+ content is taught from Reception

As well as being asked about the practice that currently takes place in terms of when LGBT+ is first taught, participants were asked their perspective of when it should first start being taught.

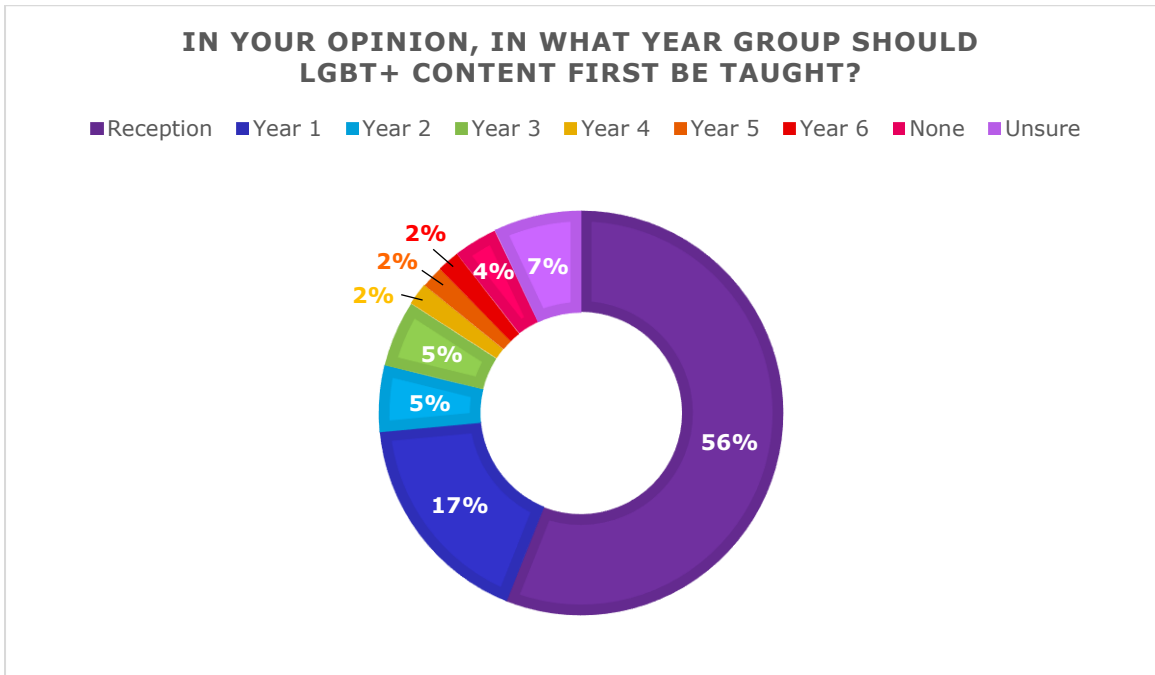


Figure 2: A pie chart depicting the opinions of primary school teachers of the year group that they think LGBT+ content should first be taught.

Almost 75% of participants suggested that LGBT+ content should first be taught from Reception or Year 1 (Figure 2). Two out of three of the interview participants also echoed this opinion, with one participant voicing the term “as early as possible”.

Conversely, 16% of participants felt that LGBT+ content should not be taught until an older age, ranging from Year 2 up to Year 6, and 4% felt it should not be taught at all. Interviewee A agreed and felt children should be older, stating that ‘Year 4 is when pupils begin a greater development of self’, therefore this would be a more appropriate age to introduce LGBT+ content.

All interviewees expressed that it was important for LGBT+ content to be taught at some point during primary school as there are pupils who either identify as LGBT+ themselves, or who have parents or family members who are LGBT+, therefore their lives should be reflected in the curriculum.

**What factors influence English primary school teachers’ confidence in teaching LGBT+ content to their class?**

There are various barriers to teaching LGBT+ content in primary schools, and these can have an impact on teachers’ confidence in delivering LGBT+ education (Barnes and Carlile, 2018, p.33; Jones, 2021). 29% of participants stated they were not confident teaching LGBT+ content to their class. Additionally, when considering participants who identify as LGBT+, 58% LGBT+ participants felt confident in teaching LGBT+ content. Figure 3 suggests that the teachers’ identity does not necessarily impact on their teaching confidence in this area.

**LGBT+ TEACHERS' RESPONSES TO THE STATEMENT 'I AM CONFIDENT IN TEACHING LGBT+ CONTENT TO MY CLASS.'**

■ Strongly disagree ■ Disagree ■ Neither agree or disagree ■ Agree ■ Strongly agree

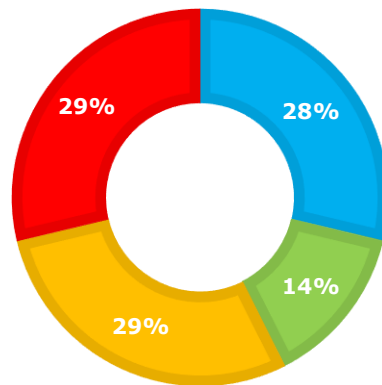


Figure 3: A pie chart illustrating whether LGBT+ teachers' feel confident or not in teaching LGBT+ content to their class.

Participants provided comments on factors that cause them to feel a lack of confidence in teaching LGBT+ content. The most common reasons for this lack of confidence were fearing opposition from parents and carers, being unsure what is age-appropriate, not having adequate subject knowledge (especially of the correct terminology) and having a lack of training and resources. Participants indicated worry that they may offend parents who identify as LGBT+ by saying something incorrect. Fear of parental conflict was a frequent reason for teachers' lack of confidence in teaching LGBT+ content - 75% of participants stated that they feared opposition from parents and carers.

*'You may find that there's a backlash from the parents that they don't feel comfortable with their children being taught that.'* – Interviewee A

70% of participants stated that they had not received adequate training from the school that they work in to teach LGBT+ content effectively and 69% of participants confirmed that they had not had any training in delivering LGBT+ content. Participants commented that they required more support in delivering LGBT+ content and that training was needed to ensure that all staff knew what to teach and how to teach it. All participants commented that either they personally were not confident in the correct terminology to use, or that they had heard other staff members using language that was not correct or appropriate, which made them aware even more of the need for effective teacher training.

**If LGBT+ content is taught in a primary school, what are the teachers' perspectives on the most effective strategies used?**

Currently in the schools that teach LGBT+ content, 37 participants identified the most common strategy was teaching within specific Personal Social and Health Education (PSHE) or RSHE lessons. 23 schools use assemblies to deliver LGBT+ content and 22 schools use class discussions, debates and circle time. Less common strategies include the use of books involving LGBT+ characters or themes, integration of LGBT+ role models across the curriculum and classroom displays.

The most effective strategies of teaching within PSHE or RSHE were having class discussion, debates or circle time. In response to why teachers felt this was an effective strategy, they commented that a PSHE scheme ensures that teaching is age appropriate, and it is planned and resourced for the teacher using correct subject content and terminology, therefore reducing their worry of misinforming or offending. Additionally, using PSHE or circle time creates a safe place for discussion to take place and clear boundaries are set to ensure respect, and it is a time that allows pupils to ask questions and reflect. Despite this, a frequent point made when discussing teacher confidence was the lack of schemes of work and resources available, highlighting the need for either more in-depth guidance on the delivery of LGBT+ content, or for schools to be made aware of the various schemes and resources that are available from charities and organisations, such as Stonewall (2019).

Another strategy that participants stated was integrating LGBT+ role models into other areas of the curriculum, with 16 participants selecting this strategy. Stonewall (2019) provides ideas every subject area, for example teaching about they/them/their<sup>s</sup> pronouns as singular as well as plural pronouns in English or using LGBT+ role models in wider curriculum subjects, such as Alan Turing in History (who is best known breaking the Enigma code during the Second World War and persecuted for his sexuality). Questionnaire participants expressed that embedding LGBT+ content across the curriculum builds a culture of inclusivity and acceptance and normalises LGBT+ matters.

*'We did a Pride Day last year... We took a colour from the rainbow in each year group and themed our activities around the theme of the colour.'* – Interviewee C

Other effective strategies identified included: assemblies, school or classroom displays, informative videos and school visitors. A range of strategies across the school seemed to be the most effective way to create an inclusive school environment according to the participants in this study (Price and Tayler, 2015, pp.74-80; Barnes and Carlile, 2018, pp.66-83).

## **Conclusion**

This study intended to explore why, how and when to deliver LGBT+ education in English primary schools

Most teachers feel LGBT+ content should be taught at some point within primary education, and most of these feel that it should begin being taught from Reception or Year 1 as this cultivates an environment of respect and acceptance.

When considering strategies to deliver LGBT+ content, this study identified that teachers' feel PSHE lessons or circle time are the most effective strategies to deliver LGBT+ content, however teachers would appreciate a specific



scheme of work to support them in delivering this. Furthermore, participants expressed that use of literature and integration of LGBT+ content across the curriculum are also effective strategies as this normalises LGBT+ topics.

Half of participants felt confident in teaching LGBT+ content, however, many teachers still felt they need to grow in confidence; the lack of training and resources and a fear of parental opposition being the key factors that concern them (DePalma, 2018, p.9; Barnes and Carlile, 2018, p.33). There is a need for resources to be developed to allow teachers and trainee teachers to build their confidence in teaching age-appropriate activities. Initial teacher training can begin this process by considering the broadness of opportunity to be inclusive and looking for opportunities to build LGBT+ content into their curriculums. Training providers should work closely with school-based mentors to allow trainee teachers the opportunity to experience how content is taught and the culture of the school can be representative of a range of communities.

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