



Enhancing young LGBT people's everyday lives through inclusivity

Policy brief - February 2022

Summary

Despite recent positive developments towards equality for LGBT people, there remains a pressing need for policies supporting LGBT youth. Existing research shows that this group have higher rates of suicidality, homelessness, and drug/alcohol abuse than their non-LGBT peers¹, all of which comes at great cost to the state. This brief reports on qualitative research carried out with LGBT youth from a wide range of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds in England, providing further evidence of these risks. It reports specific concerns raised by participants, in their own words, and highlights the policy implications of the research findings.

The research

Dr Lucy Jones (University of Nottingham) carried out in-depth, qualitative fieldwork with four LGBT youth groups based in the North and Midlands of England between 2018-19. She gained insights into the typical experiences of young LGBT people attending these groups through prolonged participant observation. In addition, she conducted interviews with 32 young people, aged between 12-20, identifying with a range of sexual and gender identities. The quotes provided below come from these interviews. All names have been changed.

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Key policy recommendations

- 1 Accessible LGBT youth groups and services need to be readily available to all young people
- 2 Schools need support understanding and addressing LGBTphobic bullying and creating safe, inclusive environments
- 3 Training is needed for school staff to understand how to support trans/non-binary students, including the harm caused by gender segregation
- 4 Primary and secondary school teachers need access to training on inclusive education
- 5 Families fostering children in care must be supported in understanding the needs of LGBT young people



32 interviews with young people aged 12-20 identifying with a range of sexual and gender identities

Ensuring that LGBT youth services, staffed by trained youth support workers, are available to all young people will provide a first line of defence against poor mental health and ensure young people facing harassment and discrimination have advocates to support them.

Findings

1. LGBT youth groups and services

Most LGBT youth groups are funded by charities rather than local authorities, making them precarious, and groups do not exist in all parts of the country. Yet they are staffed by youth workers with experience and knowledge of LGBT-specific needs, doing invaluable work supporting young people in an often intolerant, exclusionary world. The groups offer safe space for peer support and self-validation, and one-to-one support for young people unable to attend (for example due to cultural background).

“Each time I come here I just feel more comfortable with myself”
Zeba, 14

2. Tackling LGBTphobia in schools

There continues to be a serious problem with LGBTphobic bullying in schools, as demonstrated by the Government Equalities Office’s own researchⁱⁱ. All participants in the current study who had been bullied felt that their schools did little to support them.

“I get homophobic language every single day – people have tried to beat me up for it and dragged me onto the floor. The teachers say, “oh just stay away from them””
Carter, 13

“Some teachers say, “if you don’t want to be bullied then stop acting so gay””
Freya, 15

Some young people reported positive school initiatives such as the creation of LGBT peer support groups, but they overwhelmingly attributed such good practice to individual, sympathetic teachers. Others reported that they themselves had been asked to do this work on behalf of the teachers, placing the burden upon them.

“We had some stuff in Ethics because we’ve got an amazing teacher, but my friends’ teacher just talked about how Christians think it’s wrong to be gay...it just depends on who’s teaching the lesson”
Fliss, 13

Evidently, schools need additional support understanding and addressing LGBTphobic bullying, and creating safe and inclusive environments. Schools could be required to engage with specialist training, via organisations such as Educate and Celebrate, the Rainbow Flag Award or Stonewall.

3. Supporting trans students

Gender non-conforming and trans participants described their distress at being forced to use gendered facilities that did not correspond with their identity. If schools were required to provide gender-neutral bathrooms and changing facilities, as well as gender-specific ones, such experiences could be reduced. Individual, non-gendered cubicles with lockable doors would provide more privacy and therefore safety to vulnerable LGBT studentsⁱⁱⁱ.

“When I have to use the bathroom I stand there for like five minutes, like which one do I use, and eventually I wait ‘till I go home just to avoid that stress”
Oliver, 17

Similarly, participants identify a lack of understanding amongst school staff of the importance of using the correct names and pronouns for young trans and non-binary people: training on this is urgently needed.

“Even if schools can’t change it legally on the system, please stop dead-naming* and use the right pronouns ... you’re not helping the person because they’re already stressed out just about being them, and you adding onto it doesn’t help”
Koa, 15

4. Teacher training on inclusivity

Less than a third of participants reported learning about LGBT issues in school and, when this was part of their curriculum, it was usually discussed only in relation to bullying and discrimination.

“We did a whole term on equality and tolerance, a whole term! And we did nothing, zilch, zero on anything to do with LGBT”
Maya, 13

Young people want LGBT identities to be normalised via inclusion in a wide range of lessons, but they recognise that many teachers are unsure, uncomfortable, or unwilling to do this. Research shows that although LGBT relationships or identities could be discussed in a range of school subjects such as English and History, they often are not^{iv}.

“Different minorities, like disabled and gay people, should be included in History and studied, because they’re also important: bad stuff happened to them”
Chloe, 17



LGBTphobia is often understood in relation to the individual students experiencing it, when in fact it may signal a cultural issue that needs to be addressed school-wide; for this reason, inclusivity training is often overlooked^V. Statutory guidance which goes beyond relationships and sex education and requires LGBT inclusivity at both primary and secondary level would reduce marginalisation and provide support for young people as they begin to identify as LGBT.

5. Young LGBT+ people in care

All the participants in this project who were in care reported either being discriminated against or feeling unable to come out due to LGBTphobia within their foster families. This leaves already extremely vulnerable young people at even greater risk of marginalisation and may prevent them from seeking support.

“ I tried to come out to my foster family, but they don't really know much about the LGBT community, so it's kind of hard for them...they still deadname me and use the wrong pronouns
Koa, 15 ”

“ They'd make really homophobic remarks and they said bisexuality is wrong...I was kind of confused at that point, so it scared me away from ever telling them
Grace, 16 ”

This demonstrates, as recommended by social work scholars^{VI}, that foster carers should be provided with specialist training on the needs of LGBT young people, and all foster carers should be able to show that they accept and value diversity in relation to gender and sexuality.

More LGBT youth voices

An additional 40 young people from the youth groups involved in this study wrote an LGBT+ Youth Manifesto with the support of the researcher. The manifesto contains 12 key points, including a plea for better access to gender identity services, and can be viewed at lgbtmanifesto.co.uk.

Contact the researcher

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I Nodin, Nuno, et al (2015) The RaRE Research Report: LGB&T Mental Health – Risk and Resilience Explored. PACE: London.
 II Government Equalities Office (2018) National LGBT Survey: Summary Report <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-lgbt-survey-summary-report>
 III Slater, Jen and Charlotte Jones (2018) Around the toilet: A research project report about what makes a safe and accessible toilet space. Sheffield Hallam University: Sheffield, UK.
 IV Sauntson, Helen. 2018. Language, Sexuality and Education. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
 V Formby, E. 2015. 'Limitations of focussing on homophobic, biphobic and transphobic "bullying" to understand and address LGBT young people's experiences within and beyond school'. Sex Education 15(6):626–40.
 VI Schofield, Gillian et al (2019) Providing a secure base for LGBTQ young people in foster care. Child & Family Social Work 24:372–381.

*Dead-naming: using the birth name of a trans or non-binary person, which does not match their identifying gender, rather than their chosen name.