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‘We fear the repercussions from parents’: primary school parents and teachers’ perspectives on the inclusion of LGBTQ+ issues in the English primary school curriculum

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on findings from a survey conducted within a larger collaborative project, working with primary school teachers and parents to normalise conversations about LGBTQ+ issues in four English primary schools. Survey data from 96 teachers and parents highlight different perspectives on the inclusion of LGBTQ+ issues. Existing research shows teachers are often reluctant to address such issues, signalling various concerns, including fear of a negative parental reaction. Using quantitative analysis of Likert items combined with a qualitative analysis of open-ended comments, the study shows differences in perceptions between teachers and parents, and among participating parents. The findings show teachers are willing to address LGBTQ+ issues within the primary school curriculum with support from the majority of parents. Parental opposition to teaching about LGBTQ+ issues appears to be associated with some parents’ religious views and limited engagement with members of the LGBTQ+ community. Parents’ concerns largely focused on notions of childhood innocence and perceptions of age-appropriateness for teaching about/engagement with LGBTQ+ issues.

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Introduction

[M]any parents are openly against their children being ‘exposed’ to things in primary school which can make us afraid of discussing things in class, as we fear the repercussions from parents. (Participant 71- Female heterosexual teacher, religion not disclosed, no LGBTQ+ family members, has LGBTQ+ friends)

The above quote encapsulates the issue addressed in this paper: that is, primary school teachers’ fears of angry parental reaction towards any inclusion of LGBTQ+ issues within the curriculum. This concern can be found in many Western countries: for example, in Australia (Ezer et al. 2020; Ullman and Ferfolja 2016), Canada (Meyer et al. 2019) and the USA (Hurst et al. 2024) and is often associated with ‘moral panics’. A moral panic is an exaggerated fear, often promoted through the media, of perceived threats to social norms. In the context of teaching

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about LGBTQ+ issues, there is often a confusion conflating discussion of sexuality and gender identity with sexual activity (Carlile 2020; Ullman 2022). However, whether teachers' fears of parents are justified or not is a moot point.

This paper examines parents and teachers' perspectives in relation to issues around the inclusion of LGBTQ+ issues within the English primary school context. Drawing on responses from parents ($n = 70$) and teachers ($n = 26$) in four primary schools, it explores the following questions:

- What are the views of parents and teachers in England on the inclusion of LGBTQ+ issues within the primary school context?
- What particular concerns are highlighted about the inclusion of LGBTQ+ issues?
- What might explain any differences in views between (groups of) parents and teachers?

Context

In 2019, Parkfield Community primary school in Birmingham, England, became the centre of protests about using the 'No Outsiders' programme. This programme sought to educate children about diversity in society, aiming to make school communities welcoming for everyone. This included LGBTQ+ issues, and the programme had been used in the school from 2014–2018 without any significant complaint. Yet in 2019, some parents with children at the school, backed by activists from outside the area, protested that teaching about LGBTQ+ issues conflicted with their moral and religious views (Lightfoot 2019). Following these protests, statutory guidance on the teaching of Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education in England was updated (DfE 2019).¹ The guidance states that Relationships Education is compulsory in primary schools, and should promote 'healthy, respectful relationships, focusing on family and friendships, in all contexts' (DfE 2019, 4). Parents are cited as having a leading role to play in addressing these issues. Sex education is not compulsory in primary schools, although schools can teach about it. Schools have considerable freedom in how to interpret the guidance as part of a broad and balanced curriculum. However, they have to address 'everyday sexism, misogyny, homophobia and gender stereotypes and ... build a culture where these are not tolerated' (DfE 2019, 14). When addressing LGBTQ+ matters, schools are expected to teach in an age-appropriate manner and:

... 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. (DfE 2019, 15)

The guidance does not define what LGBTQ+ issues should be taught, but mentions families with 'LGBT parents' (DfE 2019, 19), the development of 'caring friendships' and 'respectful relationships' (DfE 2019, 21). Teaching about LGBTQ+ issues could explore LGBTQ+ identities and hetero- and cis-normative structures that shape societal conventions, but research shows that primary schools often tend to focus on issues around families, bullying and gender stereotypes (Carlile 2020; Meyer et al. 2019).

There have been significant studies into teacher and parental reaction to the inclusion of LGBTQ+ matters within the curriculum in places such as Australia (Ullman, Ferfolja, and Hobby 2022), Canada (Meyer et al. 2019) and the USA (Hurst et al. 2024). In contrast, relatively little is known about the situation in England. Rudoe and Ponsford (2023) have explored the views of parents towards RSE in England and Wales, showing a high degree of support for this from parents. However, their study looked at RSE in general, whereas our study is focused on LGBTQ+ issues within the curriculum. Other research has focused on teachers' views, but again tends to examine RSE in its broadest sense, although these studies have found that teaching about LGBTQ+ matters is often limited by teachers' fears of parental reaction (e.g. Cumper et al. 2024; Ezer et al. 2020). This article builds on this research by offering insights into how teachers and parents from state primary schools specifically view the teaching of LGBTQ+ topics within primary schools in England.

Theoretical framework

A premise of this paper is that schools are essentially heterosexual and cisgendered organisations, reflecting and reinforcing socially accepted norms. This view stems from queer and trans-informed theories, which highlight the ways dominant notions of sexuality and gender identity tend to be prioritised, through schools' organisational, instructional and interpersonal processes and structures (e.g. Ullman, Ferfolja, and Hobby 2022). Queer and trans-informed theories help to deconstruct and disrupt binary notions of sexuality and gender, whilst also critiquing the processes that privilege socially accepted norms.

The paper offers a critique, drawing on Foucault's notion of 'governmentality', which 'structure[s] the possible field of action of others' (Foucault 1982, 221). A central issue shaping what is possible is the Foucauldian notion of discourse, by which power is transmitted, produced, reinforced, or challenged (Foucault 1998). Discourses are powerful because they shape actions or perceptions of what is normal. Schools often contribute negatively to the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth (e.g. Harris, Wilson-Daily, and Fuller 2022), through the normative (re)production of what is deemed acceptable. This creates, what Ferfolja and Ullman (2020) have described as a 'culture of limitation', whereby identities outside of dominant heterosexual and cisgender norms are positioned as problematic. Ullman, Ferfolja, and Hobby (2022, 427) argue that 'schools are thwarted by those ... who vocally construct mention of gender and sexuality diversity in schools and curriculum as inappropriate and who strategically use the parent body as a spectre of fear'. Exploring these powerful discourses can help explain how LGBTQ+ issues are perceived, and therefore, what approaches are seen as socially acceptable within schools.

Literature review

We begin by exploring a number of key issues related to RSE in schools. They include discourse about sexuality and gender identity; childhood innocence and age-appropriateness; and teachers' fear about parental backlash.

Sexuality, gender identity and RSE

The curriculum itself is a discourse, denoting (and privileging) certain forms of knowledge. In England, schools are only required to teach about LGBTQ+ topics within the context of recent statutory RSE guidance (DfE 2019). Absenting LGBTQ+ topics from the rest of the curriculum serves to silence understanding of such matters. This creates a source of tension between those who see the inclusion of LGBTQ+ issues as appropriate and those who do not.

RSE is considered an important subject in relation to young people's development (Robinson, Smith, and Davies 2017). Several studies show teachers are comfortable with teaching topics such as reproduction, sexual health and relationships but more wary of teaching about sexuality and gender diversity, even when their personal views are more inclusive (e.g. Ezer et al. 2020; Hendriks et al. 2023). Yet the silencing of LGBTQ+ issues potentially marginalises the LGBTQ+ community within the eyes of many students (Ullman, Ferfolja, and Hobby 2022) and reinforces heteronormative and cisgenderist attitudes within schools (Ullman 2017).

Innocence of childhood, age-appropriateness and reluctance to engage with LGBTQ+ issues

As Allan et al. (2008) note, primary schools are perceived as places of safety and innocence, in which children are supposed to be nurtured and protected. Consequently, as Robinson, Smith, and Davies (2017) argue, sexuality and gender diversity are seen as 'adult' issues, from which children need to be protected due to age/maturity. However, this notion of childhood innocence serves to perpetuate heteronormative and cisgenderist assumptions, rendering LGBTQ+ issues invisible.

Robinson (2008, 115) argues that 'childhood' is an adult construct, which 'determine[s] how a child should behave, what a child should know and how and when they should come to know it'. Sexuality is something adults feel young people should first encounter in adolescence, and even then, largely on heterosexual terms (Robinson 2012). Such views link to notions of 'age-appropriateness'. This is a poorly defined concept in policy, and thus left to schools to interpret (see DfE 2019). For Neary (2023), age-appropriate is also an arbitrary, adult construct, 'mediated by a presumptive figure of the child as at once asexual, proto-heterosexual and cisgender' (2). Issues around sexuality and gender diversity are easily attacked as age-inappropriate because they endanger this vision of innocence and can be construed as efforts to sexualise young people (Irvine 2004).

There are also fears that awareness of LGBTQ+ issues will encourage young people to believe they are gay or trans. This view is bedded in pre-1970s research, where homosexuality was often pathologised as a psychological disorder, capable of being cured (Kavanagh 2016). It is now reflected in the idea that rapid-onset gender dysphoria is the result of social contagion (Ashley 2020). Elements of the UK media often use terms 'plague', 'epidemic' or 'contagion' when discussing trans youth (Horton 2023, 755).

Teachers’ fear of parental backlash

Given this context, primary school teachers’ reluctance to engage with LGBTQ+ matters is understandable. Studies in Australia (Ezer et al. 2020), Canada (Moran and Van Leent 2022) and England (Cumper et al. 2024) show that teachers are often concerned about adverse community reaction. Ferfolja and Ullman (2017) highlight how a handful of parental complaints could lead to the withdrawal of a topic. Parents thus have a ‘significant gate-keeping’ function (Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan 2019, 89), particularly those perceived as having conservative, religious views (Hurst et al. 2024). Yet concerns about parental opposition often take the form of unevidenced assumptions (e.g. Ferfolja and Ullman 2017). Several studies (Moran and Van Leent 2022; Robinson, Smith, and Davies 2017) show parents to be supportive of RSE, although some topics generate more concern. For example, Hendriks et al. (2023) study examined parents’ support for a list of 40 suggested topics and found that gender identity appeared in the bottom five of least supported topics. Although it was a divisive topic, 86% of parents still thought it should be taught, but generally deemed it appropriate for secondary-aged children. Barr et al. (2014) study of 1715 parents in Florida found that 52% supported the teaching of sexuality and gender identity in primary school – the figure was higher for students in middle and high school. Such enquiry highlights how parents are likely to be supportive of LGBTQ+ specific topics, but teaching about sexuality and gender identity does divide opinion, hence primary school teachers’ hesitation of engaging with such material.

Research design

This paper presents findings from a larger project in which a survey was conducted with four primary schools in southern England (school characteristics are shown in Table 1). The project focused on normalising conversations about LGBTQ+ issues in school and at home. It followed BERA’s (2018) ethical guidelines and was approved by the University of Reading’s research ethics committee. All participants were provided with the necessary information about the project in advance and informed consent was obtained.

The online survey, on which this paper is based, was sent by the schools to all staff and parents prior to the first of two workshops during which the results were fed into the discussion in the first workshop. The first workshop explored teachers’ and parents’ concerns related to LGBTQ+ issues. The second focused on creating materials to address

Table 1. School characteristics.

School (Pseudonym)	Location	Number on school roll*	% females/ males	% of students with Special Educational Needs	% of students for whom English is an additional language (EAL)	% of students claiming free school meals
Hazelnut	Rural	180	48/52	8	3	5
Walnut	Suburban	240	47/53	11	13	7
Chestnut	Urban	380	50/50	12	17	24
Acorn	Suburban	480	48/52	17	46	20
National average in England			49/51	14	22	26

*The number of pupils on the school roll is rounded to the nearest 10.
Data come from DfE performance tables <https://www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk/>.

participant-identified concerns, aimed at supporting the normalisation of conversations about the LGBTQ+ community in school, and at home.

We used the survey to gather the views of staff and parents, partly because this was a collaborative project between teachers and parents, but also because by doing so we could contrast teacher willingness to include LGBTQ+ topics in the curriculum with parental views. This would highlight whether concerns about parents’ views posed a genuine barrier or whether teachers’ personal attitudes were an obstacle in relation to the inclusion of LGBTQ+ issues.

The survey collected demographic data regarding participants’ sexuality and gender, and other variables, which previous studies had shown could influence views – namely religious affiliation (e.g. Hendriks et al. 2023) and having family members and/or close friends who identified as LGBTQ+ (e.g. Lemm 2006). Using a five-point scale from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’, participants responded to 20 statements. These included items, derived from literature, about having more LGBTQ+ resources in school; whether discussing such issues would encourage children to think they might be LGBTQ+; who should talk to children about such issues; and so on. Participants were also invited to express their views in a comment box. The study itself took the form of a pilot project to investigate the efficacy of the participatory research, and was also used as an opportunity to test the psychometric value of this survey.

Data analysis

There were 96 participants from the four schools involved in the project, of whom 26 were teachers and 70 were parents. The lower participation from Acorn School was due to the headteacher’s fear of a negative parental backlash. Table 2 reports details of the gender identity of participants, and Table 3 details their reported sexuality, with most identifying as heterosexual and cisgender.

Table 4 provides additional socio-demographic data.

One-way ANOVAs were used to examine whether there were any significant differences regarding the dependent variable, ‘attitudes towards LGBTQ+ issues in the primary

Table 2. Gender identity of participants.

	Parents/ carers	Teachers	Total <i>n</i>	Total %
Female	52	25	77	80.2%
Male	15	0	15	15.6%
Transgender female	0	0	0	0.0%
Transgender male	0	0	0	0.0%
Non-binary	1	0	1	1.0%
Prefer not to say	1	1	2	2.1%
Other	1	0	1	1.0%

Table 3. Participants’ reported sexuality.

	Parents/ carers	Teachers	Total <i>n</i>	Total %
Heterosexual	62	21	83	86.5%
Lesbian	1	2	3	3.1%
Bisexual	3	1	4	4.2%
I am not sure	1	0	1	1.0%
Prefer not to say	3	2	5	5.2%

Table 4. Overview of descriptive statistics of variables used in ANOVAs.

	<i>N</i>	Min	Max	Mean or %	<i>SD</i>	Missing
<i>Dependent Variable</i>						
Attitudes towards LGBTQ+ issues in Primary School	96	1.15	5.00	3.753	1.080	0*
<i>Sociodemographic data</i>						
Parent/carer	70			72.9%		0
Teacher	26			27.1%		-
Reported religion	32			33.3%		6
Reported LGBTQ+ family members	33			34.4%		6
Reported LGBTQ+ friends	69			71.9%		1
School						3
Hazelnut	45			46.9%		
Chestnut	32			33.3%		
Acorn	5			5.2%		
Walnut	11			11.5%		

*Mean was calculated from participant answers of at least 11 of the 13 items pertaining to this scale.

school', based upon whether participants were parent/carers or teachers, whether they identified with a religion (from a given list of faiths), and whether they had LGBTQ+ family members or friends. Differences between schools were also examined.

The qualitative data were coded separately. In total, 41 participants added comments, ranging in length from 20 to 200 words, with the average length being around 85 words. Of the 41 responses, 35 came from parents. Eight of these comments came from participants who had indicated negative views about LGBTQ+ issues in school.

Comments were open coded, followed by axial coding (Saldaña 2016), which identified five broad categories. These themes were age-appropriateness and childhood innocence; who should be responsible for educating children about sexuality and gender identity; the minority status of the LGBTQ+ community; concerns about 'contagion' and sexualisation; and issues surrounding normalising LGBTQ+ identities.

Results

Quantitative survey results

As the psychometric qualities of the questionnaire items were not known prior to the survey, such an assessment was needed. The high Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value showed that factor analysis was appropriate (.912), and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant with a *p* value less than .001. Thus, exploratory factor analysis was used to identify those survey items that best measured participants' views.

Of the 20 initial items, four were eliminated due to cross-loading issues. An additional three items, which did not cross-load and loaded together on the same factor, were discarded due to their low degree of reliability as a potential scale. The 13 items that clearly loaded together (and were also shown to have a high degree of reliability: $\alpha = .97$; $\omega = .97$), were retained to form the DV 'attitudes towards LGBTQ+ issues in the primary school' variable used in the following ANOVA (see online supplemental [Appendix A](#) for details of this scale).

The ANOVA results showed that the teachers surveyed ($n = 26$) had significantly more positive attitudes towards the integration of LGBTQ+ topics and personnel in primary schools than parents/carers [$F(1,94) = 10.10$, $p = .002$]. Those participants

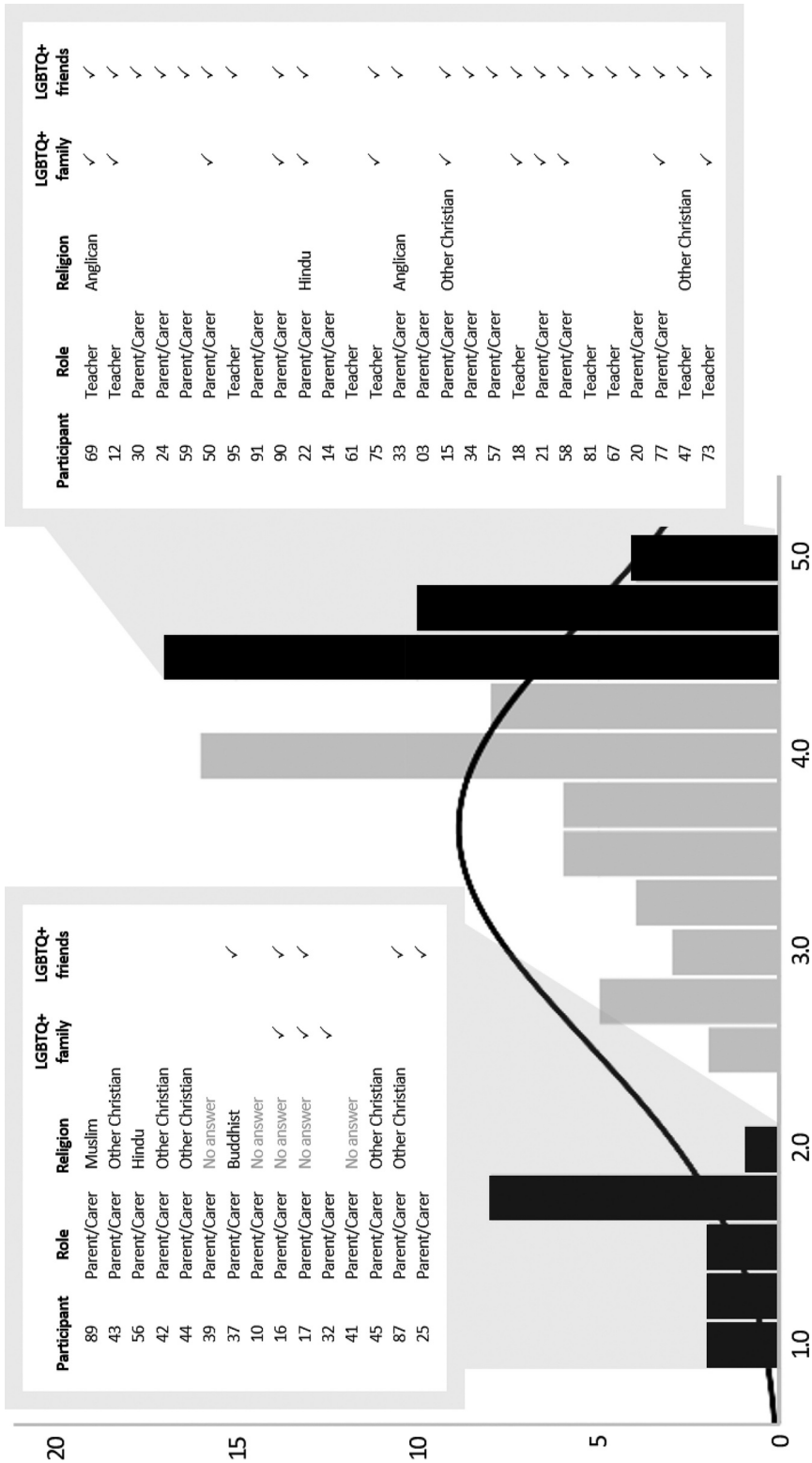


Figure 1. Characteristics highlighted for participants holding more positive ($n = 27, M = 4.8$) and negative ($n = 15, M = 1.7$) attitudes towards LGBTQ+ in primary school.

who reported identifying with a religion ($n = 32$) tended to hold less favourable views [$F(1,88) = 13.79$, $p < .001$] to such integration than their non-religious counterparts. There were exceptions, however, which can be seen, for example, in the open-ended responses and in [Figure 1](#).

No significant differences were observed in the ANOVA comparisons of the four schools [$F(3,89) = 0.807$, $p = 0.493$], nor when separately comparing pairs of schools, for example, Hazelnut and Chestnut [$F(1,75) = 1.57$, $p = 0.214$]. ANOVA also showed that those participants who reported having LGBTQ+ friends ($n = 69$) held significantly more positive attitudes towards LGBTQ+ issues in primary school [$F(1,93) = 23.57$, $p < .001$], while those reporting known LGBTQ+ family members ($n = 33$) did not show significant differences between those with no known LGBTQ+ family members [$F(1,88) = 2.78$, $p = 0.099$].

[Figure 1](#) shows the distribution of responses for the mean of the 'attitudes towards LGBTQ+ issues in the primary school' scale. We have added descriptive tables to the figure to highlight characteristics of those participants who had the most negative and most positive views. Scores up to 2 indicate a largely negative response on the scale. As seen in [Figure 1](#), the most negative responses were given very largely by parents. Only 40% of the 15 participants with the most negative views on the scale reported having LGBTQ+ family members or friends. A score over 4 indicates a generally positive attitude to addressing LGBTQ+ issues in primary schools. As noted above, and is also evident in [Figure 1](#), of the teachers and parents who had more positive attitudes towards the inclusion of LGBTQ+ issues in the primary school, 85% had LGBTQ+ friends and/or family and few identified with a religion.

Qualitative findings from the survey

The open-ended comments were categorised into five themes, representing different discourses, reflecting what was seen as acceptable in primary schools and the arguments used to substantiate positions. The first category of age-appropriateness and childhood innocence demonstrated a range of positions.

Age-appropriateness and childhood innocence

Participant 43 had the most negative score from the survey, with an average of 1.23. The following comment from her revealed a strong concern about age-appropriateness:

Primary school is not an appropriate place to teach any of these matters ... They are too young to have these matters ... discussed. (Participant 43 – Female heterosexual parent/carer, Christian, no LGBTQ+ family members or friends)

The issue of age-appropriateness, and by implication the desire to preserve the innocence of children, was the most common theme expressed, raised by 19 respondents. Those with scores of 2 or less were more likely to object to coverage of LGBTQ+ material completely:

There is no way primary age children are ready to think about sexual orientation, this is something most people discover as a teenager . . . Can't we just let kids be kids?! (Participant 32 – Female heterosexual parent/carer, no religion, had LGBTQ+ family members, no LGBTQ+ friends)

Those participants who were more positive about primary schools addressing LGBTQ+ issues, with scores between 2 and 4, made reference to children's levels of maturity and ability to understand questions about sexuality and gender identity:

... each child will be at different stages of maturity in this exploration, and I think that primary school will have such a spectrum that it's difficult to cover such a complex topic sensitively and without exerting any pressure on a child. (Participant 49 – Female heterosexual parent/carer, Anglican, has LGBTQ+ family members, no LGBTQ+ friends)

Several participants felt that LGBTQ+ issues should only be discussed with older children. For example, participant 7 (male heterosexual parent, Jewish, has no LGBTQ+ family, has LGBTQ+ friends) stated: 'Primary school is an appropriate place – maybe for Years 5 & 6 - not earlier though'.² The age at which LGBTQ+ matters should be introduced did vary by participant. Those who had the strongest positive response to the survey, mentioned issues should be covered in an age-appropriate way, but were keen that such discussions happened:

I think it is entirely appropriate to discuss these topics in primary school. I think what really matters though, is representation. Not just having a lesson every now and then on the issue, but children seeing, through media (books/tv) a diversity in individuals and a diversity in relationships. (Participant 8 – Female heterosexual parent/carer, no religion, no LGBTQ+ family members, has LGBTQ+ friends)

The issue of what counts as age-appropriate was addressed by a few participants. For example,

I welcome [a] focus on relationships, respect, consent and role models as the starting point in primary school, which does not need to be labelled 'sex education' and is age appropriate. My own experience, and from discussions with family and friends who identify as LGBTQ+ is that one becomes aware of feelings at an early age (my own experience was about 8 or 9). I didn't need to be told about the detail of sex at this age, or even talk about it at all, as this is all pre-puberty and I didn't have a concept of sexual attraction at that age, but it would have been nice to know that there was nothing wrong with feeling like this! (Participant 9 – Female bisexual parent/carer, no religion, has LGBTQ+ family members and friends)

However, a total of 10 responses specifically stated that primary-aged children were just too young to engage with discussion of LGBTQ+ matters at all.

Parental responsibility

Four respondents felt that it was the parents' responsibility to talk to their children about LGBTQ+ matters.

As a parent I very much believe it is my responsibility to teach my children about sexuality and gender issues. It is not the place of the school or educators to do this as the children are not their responsibility to raise. (Participant 42 – Female heterosexual parent/carer, other Christian, no LGBTQ+ family members or friends)

Some of the views expressed however seemed to be contradictory. For example, participant 42, quoted above, felt that all people deserved equal treatment, yet discussion of LGBTQ+ matters in school was inappropriate.

The minority status of the LGBTQ+ community

Three participants, including two who were positively disposed towards addressing LGBTQ+ issues in schools, commented on the fact that the LGBTQ+ community was a minority group and should not take up a disproportionate amount of school time:

Shouldn't we take the time and resources that our schools and educators have to talk about matters that affect more of the population? (Participant 43 – Female heterosexual parent/carer, Christian, no LGBTQ+ family members or friends)

One participant drew a distinction between trans issues and LGB issues, due to the very small number of trans individuals recorded in the official national census in 2021.

I fear in the current climate it may be difficult to 'teach' about transgender issues in particular, without some level of inaccuracy, bias (positive or negative) or incompleteness. I am also concerned that discussion of transgender issues at primary level would misrepresent it as a common occurrence if it was given anywhere near as much attention as the media and public discourse give it. In the last census, about half of one percent (0.5%) of the people who answered (a total of 45.4 m people) said they did not identify with the same sex as that registered at birth—a very small minority of people—whereas 3.2% identified as LGB+. Any 'official' discussion of transgender issues should be proportionate and acknowledge that it's rare. (Participant 63 - Female heterosexual parent/carer, no religion, no LGBTQ+ family members, no LGBTQ+ friends)

An additional two parents also drew a distinction between the 'LGB' and 'T' communities. Participant 29 said:

I think sexual orientation and transgender are two completely separate issues and need to be treated separately by society and by schools rather than grouped together. Supporting one does not mean that automatic support for the other should be assumed, or vice versa. The word transphobia has been weaponised to shut down legitimate conversation about the conflict between what trans groups want and women's rights; particularly to safe spaces and fair sports... I am also concerned about the social contagion aspect of the trans movement and would like this explored further before teaching about trans issues is taught in schools. (Participant 29 – rejected gender as an unhelpful social construct, bisexual, no religion, has LGBTQ+ friends)

Contagion and sexualisation

Participant 29's comments highlight concern about 'contagion'. Two other participants explicitly expressed anxiety that teaching about LGBTQ+ issues might encourage children to identify as such. Two additional participants automatically equated discussion of LGBTQ+ issues with sexualisation:

Sexualising kids is NEVER acceptable. For the welfare of the kids, we would remove them from any school that does so. (Participant 17 – Male, undisclosed sexuality, undisclosed religion, has LGBTQ+ family and friends)

Why must we continuously sexualise our young people? (Participant 32 – Female heterosexual parent/carer, no religion, has LGBTQ+ family members, no LGBTQ+ friends)

Inclusion and normalisation of LGBTQ+ identities

Despite the above anxieties and objections, most comments highlighted a willingness to support the inclusion of LGBTQ+ issues in primary schools. Nine comments explicitly referred to the importance of normalising LGBTQ+ identities:

I think it's extremely important that children have an opportunity to discuss LGBTQ+ issues in an age-appropriate manner. But also, being gay/transgender is a normal part of life, and so it shouldn't just be part of a 'lesson', but e.g., in English, books should be studied that have a gay protagonist, or in art an artist's life in the LGBTQ+ community could be relevant etc. (Participant 27 - Female heterosexual parent/carer, no religion, no LGBTQ+ family members, has LGBTQ+ friends)

A further nine participants, indicated that children should be able to express their identity and be themselves:

Schools should be a place where a child with questions about their own sexuality or gender can feel comfortable to question that - not scared of doing so because it's taboo. But discussions need to be age-appropriate and in line with the timings of when reproduction/sexuality/relationships are taught and discussed. (Participant 4 - Female heterosexual parent/carer, other Christian, has LGBTQ+ family members and friends)

This view acknowledges that primary-aged children may have questions about their gender and/or sexual identity, but the comment also resonates with other findings about the need to ensure that any discussion of LGBTQ+ issues is age-appropriate.

Another point raised by seven participants was the need to address prejudicial attitudes, and promote tolerance and acceptance of difference:

I believe that children should know everyone is not the same but should always be treated respectfully and as an equal, so teaching a child young will open their minds and hopefully not discriminate anyone for any choice they make and will give them a better understanding. And to let them know whatever you choose is ok [and] you don't have to hide who you really are. (Participant 48 - Female heterosexual parent/carer, no religion, has LGBTQ+ family members and friends)

Some participants were concerned that children might need a strong, alternative perspective to the one they received at home:

Failure to highlight these things and educate in school will result in children turning into their parents with their views ... homophobic and transphobic morons will not adequately educate their children and will enforce vile views on them through no fault of the children. (Participant 50 - Female heterosexual parent/carer, no religion, has LGBTQ+ family members and friends)

Discussion

This study's findings present a hopeful picture of the willingness of teachers and parents to engage with LGBTQ+ issues in the primary school curriculum. Most teachers in the sample were advocates for the inclusion of LGBTQ+ material, as well as many parents. This paper reflects findings from other studies that show parents are largely supportive of RSE

being inclusive of LGBTQ+ related issues (Hendriks et al. 2023; Moran and Van Leent 2022; Ullman, Ferfolja, and Hobby 2022).

However, drawing on Foucault's notion of governmentality and how this shapes a specific field of action, we can see how particular discourses serve to create a 'culture of limitation' (Ferfolja and Ullman 2020) restricting discussion of sexuality and gender identities, and contributing to the social stigmatisation and marginalisation of LGBTQ+ individuals. These discourses restraint and constraint teachers who seem to have misconceptions and exaggerated concerns about the attitudes of most parents towards the inclusion of LGBTQ+ material in the curriculum.

Our paper highlights a particularly strong discourse focusing on age-appropriateness, linked to notions of childhood innocence and the desexualisation of school spaces, in which sexuality and gender identity are deemed to be 'adult' issues, and therefore inappropriate for children (Neary 2023; Robinson 2012). As Robinson (2012) argues, drawing on Foucauldian notions of power, this desire to 'protect' children, couched in terms of being in the best interests of the child, can be a means of maintaining an established adult-child power relationship, designed to control and regulate what it means to be a child. Clearly, protecting children from harm is desirable, but discourse and debate around age-appropriateness shows that notions of harm are contested.

For some parents, including those with a religious faith, LGBTQ+ matters were completely inappropriate for primary-aged children. Clearly, those with religious beliefs may hold a variety of positions towards LGBTQ+ issues, but this study found a clear association between identifying with a religion and expressing more negative attitudes towards teaching children about LGBTQ+ issues (c.f., Hendriks et al. 2023; Hurst et al. 2024). For others, age-appropriateness was seen as linked to maturity, so only older children could learn about such issues. For others who were keen that children learn about LGBTQ+ issues, concern was more about what was actually taught, arguing for a focus on issues such as relationships, diversity and respect.

Determining just what is age-appropriate can be a challenge, but simply pretending that issues around sexuality and gender are irrelevant or do not exist for young children ignores the ways in which hetero- and cisnormativity dominate the ways schools and teachers operate (Robinson 2012). Ignoring LGBTQ+ people and their needs risks positioning LGBTQ+ people and identities 'as abnormal, immoral, problematic, non-contributory, and even socially perilous' (Ullman, Ferfolja, and Hobby 2022, 426). As Carlile (2020) shows, it is possible to find common ground with parents, including those with strong religious views, by teaching about anti-bullying, diversity generally and 'different' families. Although Carlile (2020) recognises such an approach may be seen as potentially pathologising and heteronormative, she argues it can act as a gateway to 'usualise' a LGBTQ+ presence in the curriculum. This is important because introducing lessons which include a focus on gender and sexual diversity early in schools helps build acceptance before social norms become embedded (Goldfarb and Lieberman 2021).

However, other discourses serve to deter teachers from engaging with LGBTQ+ topics in the primary school curriculum, limiting what is seen as permissible. These include parents' perceptions of their primary role in educating their children, positioning LGBTQ+ issues as a minority 'interest', and one that may 'infect' and/or sexualise children. Nesting the teaching of LGBTQ+ issues within the family, rather than the school, takes power and responsibility for education away from schools. Seeing LGBTQ+ topics a minority issue simply marginalises the group, and ignores the fact that some young people do question

their sexuality and gender identity during the primary years, or may have family and friends who are LGBTQ+, and need validation as such. The language, used by some participants, concerning ‘contagion’ and ‘sexualisation’, especially in relation to trans issues, disconnecting ‘LGB’ from ‘T’ matters, serves to marginalise the trans community.

Ultimately, a combination of discourses exerts power over what is deemed acceptable in terms of curriculum content. Teachers, despite their own positive position towards LGBTQ+ issues, are highly sensitive to the views of parents, which acts as a ‘culture of limitation’ (Ferfolja and Ullman 2020). Indeed, senior staff in Acorn Primary school were so worried about participating in this study that they refused to circulate the online survey link to parents, given their belief that their parent demographic was religiously conservative. As Johnson (2023, 9) states, ‘These discourses [about the appropriateness of any LGBTQ+ provision] perpetuate the idea that talking about LGBTQ+ people with children is problematic, difficult and dangerous’. The result is that teachers, believing themselves to be under the watchful gaze of disapproving parents, self-police their activity (Johnson 2023).

This negative positioning of LGBTQ+ issues seems to reflect a current, wider public discourse in the UK about LGBTQ+ issues. The power of the media, especially the conservative and right-wing media, to shape discourse around LGBTQ+ inclusion in the school curriculum, has been documented elsewhere (O’Loughlin, Schmidt, and Glazier 2022). In the UK, the current Conservative government has made several pronouncements that seem likely to stir up antagonism towards the LGBTQ+ community, creating a ‘moral panic’ as part of a larger ‘culture war’ (e.g. Strudwick 2023). The emergence of neo-conservative movements, often linked to conservative religious groups that are hostile to LGBTQ+ rights, has also been documented (Brown 2006; Porter 2012). Indeed, O’Loughlin, Schmidt, and Glazier (2022, 1) refer to a ‘project of queer epistemicide’, implying a concerted effort by specific groups, which ‘not only serves to erase mention of queer folks in the classroom [but does] enormous harm to the queer students within those classes’. It is not surprising given such public discourse that teachers feel under surveillance and are wary of incorporating LGBTQ+ material into the primary school classroom.

The danger of teachers listening to closely the views of a vocal minority is the marginalisation of LGBTQ+ issues, and the reinforcement of hetero- and cisnormativity, to the detriment of gender and sexuality diverse young people. This occurs despite the fact that all the teachers in the present study expressed a desire to include LGBTQ+ issues within the classroom. Not only does the absence of LGBTQ+ matters in the curriculum have an impact on LGBTQ+ children themselves, but it also means that other children lack awareness and understanding of their LGBTQ+ peers, reinforcing social norms whereby LGBTQ+ identifying people are positioned as abnormal. There is a need, therefore, for teachers to be made aware that attempts to include LGBTQ+ matters in the curriculum are likely to be welcomed by the majority of parents.

Conclusion

The findings from this study indicate that teachers’ worries about negative reactions from parents to the teaching of LGBTQ+ issues in the primary school curriculum may be largely misplaced. Additionally, the study has generated a new scale with seemingly sound psychometric properties, that could prove useful in future mixed or quantitative studies. Although

this paper reports of findings from a study involving a small sample of parents, who were largely heterosexual and cisgender, its findings align with those of larger studies conducted elsewhere (e.g. Ullman, Ferfolja, and Hobby 2022). Indeed, current neoconservative public discourse around LGBTQ+ issues appears to be out of step with majority views. Because of this, primary school teachers should feel more confident in addressing LGBTQ+ issues within the curriculum, as they do have the support of most parents to teach about such issues. However, it would seem prudent to engage parents more openly with what schools actually teach concerning LGBTQ+ matters, as some parents are worried. Doing so, could help to avoid inaccurately informed 'moral panics' about 'contagion' and 'sexualisation'. As Carlile (2020) has shown, common ground can nearly always be found, making teachers and parents more comfortable with ideas about how to move forward in creating primary schools that are LGBTQ+ inclusive.

Notes

1. The abbreviation RSE will be used when discussing Relationship and Sex Education generally, as it is widely used in different educational contexts. Relationships Education will be used where it is specifically appropriate and will not be abbreviated to RE to avoid confusion with Religious Education.
2. In England, children in Years 5 and 6 are 9–11 years old.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author.

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Appendix A.

List of survey items used to calculate the scores on the Views of LGBTQ+ in Primary School Scale

- There should be more children's books about gay and lesbian families, in the library and used in the class
- The school should not have books about transgender issues in the library and the classroom (Reverse scored)
- Discussing sexual orientation in class might make children gay (Reverse scored)
- Discussing transgender issues in school will encourage young children to think they are the opposite gender (Reverse scored)
- KS2 children in primary school are too young to be thinking about things like sexual orientation (Reverse scored)
- I would be happy for my child to be taught by a teacher who was transgender
- I would be happy for my child to be taught by a teacher who was openly gay
- Parents/carers should choose what to teach their children about sexual orientation. The school has no right to be involved in this (Reverse scored)
- The school should teach about LGBTQ+ issues even if some parents/carers have serious objections to this
- I would be comfortable if my child/child in my class wanted to use a name opposite to their assigned gender (e.g. a boy wanting to be called Sally)
- As a parent/carer/teacher, I would be worried if LGBTQ+ matters were taught as part of the KS2 primary school curriculum (Reverse scored)
- KS2 aged children are too young to be thinking about their gender identity (Reverse scored)
- KS2 aged children are too young to be thinking about their sexual orientation (Reverse scored)