

LGBT Voices of Pupils with SEND

This paper particularly discusses the LGBT voices of children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), who are also sometimes referred to as neurodivergent. Within this concept, I am also acknowledging the fact that many neurodivergent people have overlapping conditions and that increases the differences as perceived by society. The Equality Act 2010 is there to give people from marginalised groups the message that everyone deserves to be valued. In reality, many neurodivergent people can face multiple societal barriers daily. A lot of them have several overlapping conditions which will affect the way their thought processes will gain meaning from a situation, context or content. The more differences a person has in terms of the society's 'normal' the more difficult it is for them in terms of those 'normal' systems. It is important to acknowledge that neurodiverse people who also identify as LGTB have even more barriers posed by society, partially due to layered stigma. For this category of people, the differences are increased as perceived by society.

Before I embarked on my PhD studies at the Educational Department at Goldsmiths, I had worked as a SEN teacher and a Behaviour Lead in a school for the Blind. As someone who identifies as bisexual, it was very important to me to educate the children and young people in my school about the different types of protected characteristics many of which were also shared amongst the school community members. Prejudice is a learnt behaviour and children and young people with SEND often face stigma. Society's perception of disabled people concerning intimacy can pose its challenges. Within the educational context, one of the challenges is pupils with SEND having their right to access 'sensitive' information questioned (Toft and Franklin, 2020). The 'sensitive' topics include LGBT Relationship and Sex Education related concepts, such as intimacy, gender identity and sexual orientation. There also seem to be ongoing issues regarding neurodivergent pupils' views being taken into consideration when it comes to decision-making about their intimate lives. While it is generally acknowledged that people with disabilities have the same rights to sexual and reproductive desires and hopes as those who are unaffected by disability, society has overlooked their sexuality, reproduction-related anxieties and desires as well as human rights (Addlakha et. al, 2017).

My colleagues and I were determined to not let the fear, felt amongst a small number of our other colleagues, affect the pupils' opportunities to learn about 'sensitive' concepts. After all, we were not trying to convert anybody and make them gay. We were simply trying to

educate them about what is out there in our society. We understood the importance of talking about inclusive education, including LGBT RSE. This also meant making the training of our colleagues about how to deliver an inclusive LGBT RSE curriculum one of our top priorities. This was important so that once trained they would have the tools and confidence to talk about any topic with the pupils which was one way for the pre-existing stigma and fear to dissipate. The LGBTQ/SEND intersection became very important to me around this time because I realised that both LGBT and SEND were very much missing from research and other educational discourse around RSE.

The next logical step for me was to liaison with a national LGBT charity that worked on delivering 'LGBT Inclusion' training programmes to (mainstream) schools. They helped with our efforts to make our school more LGBT inclusive and relied on the SEN knowledge and expertise of my colleagues and me to make their programme more SEN-friendly. For example, we would produce their programme posters in braille to help pupils access this information which included the key facts about the Equality Act 2010 and its purpose. As educators, we needed to feel that this type of intervention would be meaningful to our learners, most of whom had more complex SEND and all of whom were registered blind. With regards to teaching neurodivergent learners with sensory impairments, one must bring the information to them in a way that makes their learning fully possible and accessible. In other words, abstract information often does not help. Therefore, it was important for us to establish a 'real' LGBT-inclusive setting via initiatives, such as 'Rainbow Clubs'. These were largely pupil-led and presented a way for our pupils to meet and interact with 'real life' LGBTQ role models and peers via open discussions. Amongst the topics of their choice were same-sex relationships, gender identity, pronouns, dead-naming and so on. No topic was forbidden, and they thanked us for the opportunity to not be viewed as 'child-like' or asexual. Some of these students wrote poems about their 'rainbow' experience and felt empowered by these opportunities which enabled them to think more deeply about their own identity and sexual orientation because now they had the tools to do it. Their involvement in creating a more LGBT inclusive school environment went beyond participating in Rainbow Clubs. They understood the importance of having uni-sex toilets and neutral-coloured uniforms available which also sent a clear message to any visitors that we were an LGBT+ inclusive school. They had an input into the school's policies to make more changes reflecting their interests and needs. They also arranged with the school's library staff to have their chosen LGBT-themed storybooks printed in braille. There was no fear around any topic and all initiatives on our part were inspired by the pupils' interests and curiosity. We also included them in adapting the curriculum so that it would be more LGBT inclusive and reflective of the September 2020 inclusive RSE guidelines. For example, in Art we would

introduce a list of famous works of artists who were related to different intersections, such as Frida Kahlo who was both bisexual and disabled.

The growing understanding of intersectionality, alongside further academic 'maturing' in terms of theory and praxis, suggests its continuing relevance for comprehending issues of privilege and subjugation (Grand and Zwier, 2014). My own experience with implementing LGBT aspects into the overall culture of my former SEN school setting has inspired me to make the LGBTQ/SEND intersection the basis for my PhD research. The other reason behind my decision was the research gap concerning this subject. The existing global literature available at the time largely involved the most able learners with SEND. This paucity of research on LGBT inclusion in the context of classrooms serving pupils with SEND will hopefully be less of an issue in the future as intersectionality is becoming an increasingly popular framework in terms of interpreting the interrelated nature of prejudice and discrimination (Carastathis, 2014). Speaking from my own experience, the LGBTQ SEND intersection is one intersection SEN practitioners are less comfortable with - compared to other intersections. I am hoping to understand the underlying reasons behind this in more depth via my research in the next few years. Every young person should be able to see themselves, and their family, represented in their school curriculum, in the books they read on posters, on walls and in worksheets. This involves everyone with a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010 - including disability, faith, race, ethnicity and trans and non-binary pupils. Research suggests that the curriculum is strongly binary, making it hard for the children and young people who do not place themselves within the gender binary to come out at school (Paechter, Toft and Carlile, 2021). We should start with teaching about LGBT/SEND inclusive concepts in the very early stages of schooling and having a truly inclusive curriculum is key in this process.

Since the start of my PhD studies, I have consulted many SEN practitioners, school leaders and academics about effective ways of supporting LGBT+ pupils. It is very encouraging to see that the SEN school culture concerning LGBT+ inclusion is starting to change, gradually. There is no such thing as 'normal' but sadly our society has perimeters which identify what 'normal' is. The more conditions neurodivergent individuals have the more differences they have as perceived by the society which means there are more barriers for them. I am hoping my PhD research will impact the values and ethos as well as the curriculum of SEN settings in such a way that they will be fully inclusive regarding LGBT neurodiverse pupils and thus minimise the spectrum of barriers currently posed by the society. Schools' neurodivergent-friendly approaches to LGBT inclusion would make the biggest difference to lives within a society that is neurodiverse.

References:

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