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School-based LGBT groups and pastoral care

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Introduction

This chapter addresses the experiences and pastoral needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and other gender and sexual minoritised (LGBT+) young people in schools. With increasing numbers of young people, and in particular those who identify as LGBT+, requesting help from mental health services in the UK for issues such as anxiety and depression, LGBT+ young people have been the subject of increasing interest and concern within UK policy and practice. This is often related to (in particular homophobic) bullying, though school responses that focus on individual 'bullies' and 'victims' often neglect wider social environments (Pascoe 2013, Formby 2015). As part of an attempt to improve school experiences of LGBT+ young people in the UK, the last few decades have seen increasing interest in research on, and practices to try and address, homophobic bullying (Formby forthcoming, Moyano and Sánchez-Fuentes 2020), with this term expanding more recently to include biphobic and transphobic bullying, thereby including more experiences of LGBT+ young people (Formby forthcoming, Mitchell et al 2014). With increasing numbers of young people coming 'out' as LGBT+ in the UK according to recently released census 2021 data, there is a pressing need to understand and address any pastoral needs they may have. This chapter, drawing on a number of recent research projects undertaken by the authors, examines school-based LGBT groups, and how they might contribute to LGBT+ young people's wellbeing and pastoral care within schools. The projects were: an evaluation of a project based in the South West of England aimed at addressing anti-LGBT prejudice in schools (Project 1, see Formby et al 2016); research into the needs and experiences of LGBT+ young people in one English region (Project 2, see Formby 2019); a five-year research and evaluation project running alongside a new LGBT youth service in the North of England (Project 3, see Formby and Woodiwiss 2022); a research project comparing approaches to supporting LGBT+ youth in England and Sweden (Project 4, see Woodiwiss and Formby 2023).

Context setting

Policy and practice-orientated research has indicated that "a significant proportion of LGBT students experience homophobic and transphobic violence in school", more so than at home or in their communities, and more so than their non-LGBT peers (UNESCO 2016, 14), and this can have a negative effect on their health and wellbeing (Demissie et al 2018, Rivers et al 2018, Wilson and Cariola 2020). In the UK, research by leading LGBT charity Stonewall has suggested that 45% of LGBT youth experience homophobic, biphobic or transphobic (HBT) bullying at some point in school (Bradlow et al 2017). By far, the focus across most research is on peer-to-peer bullying, though there is also some discussion of potential bullying behaviour from school staff (Formby 2013, Allen 2019, McBride 2021). Such experiences can have impacts on educational outcomes and employment prospects (Hazel et al 2019, Sansone 2019), as well as on substance use and even homelessness (Allen 2019, Formby 2015, Jones and Hillier 2013). Previous research (Formby 2015) has also identified that staff misgendering and/or misnaming ('dead naming') students is a particular issue for those who identify as trans or gender non-binary, but can be overlooked or misunderstood when bullying is the sole focus of attention within schools and broader advocacy work. Whilst a focus on bullying can divert attention from such wider issues, it can also contribute to a context where young people and/or staff members working with them

assume that all LGBT+ young people will inevitably, and equally, face bullying, which is not the case (Formby 2013, 2015).

Readers should be mindful of a body of work that advocates caution in assuming the inevitability of experiences of bullying for LGBT+ youth (Formby 2015), with a number of authors identifying problematic 'suffering' (Airton 2013, Ellis 2007), 'victim' (Ellis 2007, Marshall 2010) or 'wounded' (Youdell 2004) tropes dominating existing research. An understanding of young LGBT+ people as being inherently in need of 'protection' serves to mark them as fundamentally different from their heterosexual and/or cisgender (i.e. not trans) peers (Airton 2013, Rasmussen 2006). This approach also lends itself to schools *reacting* to individual cases of bullying, rather than implementing *preventative* whole school measures. This is not helpful in the long term, not least because discourses of 'risk' can have a distancing or numbing effect, preventing practitioners from understanding their own potential role in contributing to heteronormative school environments (Rasmussen 2006).

Whilst a range of research has documented the possible detrimental impacts of bullying and/or school staff practices, research has also indicated that where schools provide more supportive environments, they can lessen the potential for negative outcomes for LGBT students (Ollis 2013, Proulx et al 2019, Russell 2005). However, although UNESCO (2016) has proposed that inclusive curricula should affirm representations of sexual and gender diversity, a range of evidence suggests that LGBT+ young people are rarely included in the formal school curriculum, with explanations for this including staff discomfort, lack of confidence, and/or fear about including LGBT identities within teaching (Ellis 2007, Flores 2012, Formby 2011, 2013, 2015, Ollis 2013, Quinlivan 2002). The formal school curriculum can therefore reproduce heterosexuality as 'normal', and non-heterosexuality as 'other' (Macintosh 2007).

Within schools, UNESCO (2016) outlines that responses to what they term violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity/expression should be comprehensive, including policy implementation, development of relevant curricula and training materials, training and support opportunities for staff, support for students and families, and monitoring and evaluation. In their research, Mitchell et al (2014) found that a 'whole school' approach across the curriculum aimed at tackling prejudice towards LGBT people was thought to work better than standalone teaching on HBT bullying. They later suggested that a whole school approach should include anti-bullying policies, curriculum planning, student voice, student support, and partnerships with parents and the local community (Mitchell et al 2016). Where schools do not include or make LGBT+ identities visible, this can be understood as equating to disapproval of those identities (Atkinson 2020). Where young people understand silence as 'shaming' (Formby 2013), this can lead to a school being viewed as homophobic, where homophobia is (re)interpreted as an absence of inclusion, rather than active prejudice or discrimination (Formby and Donovan 2020). Research therefore suggests that whilst teachers and practitioners may view silence as reflecting a 'neutral' position, children and young people do not share this perspective, and this suggests that inaction can actually be harmful (Atkinson 2020, Formby 2013, Formby and Donovan 2020). As Rofes (2000, 459) argued, silences teach: "what [teachers] say and what [they] don't say, what is voiced and what is silenced, create[s] knowledges for students which contain tremendous implications". Interestingly, whilst students may perceive a school to be homophobic, they do not always view language use that many adult campaigners and researchers would define as

homophobic (such as the phrase ‘that’s so gay’) in the same way (Formby 2013, 2015, Fulcher 2017).

One growing approach to include or support LGBT+ young people in schools is the move to facilitate groups for LGBT+ young people outside the classroom, often in the form of Gay-Straight Alliances. These groups or clubs began life in North America as GSAs, though more recently they have frequently become known as Genders and Sexualities Alliances. Though varying considerably, in America they are usually described as extracurricular groups that provide a safe environment where LGBT+ students can come together with allies to engage in discussion, learning and mutual support (Calzo et al 2018, McGlashan and Fitzpatrick 2017, Poteat et al 2011, Toomey et al 2011). Mayberry et al (2013, 307) note that the provision of such groups is an “increasingly familiar strategic intervention designed to disrupt antigay school environments”, but that “there has been little research on the ways in which they do—and do not—impact school climate”. In the UK, they are often called diversity, equality, LGBT, or rainbow clubs/groups; whilst there is very little written about them in a UK context, what we do know suggests that they may be complex to implement. There are uncertainties, for example, about whether school-based groups should ideally only be for LGBT+ young people or also allies: whilst LGBT Youth Scotland guidance uses the term alliance, Stonewall and the Proud Trust refer to them as LGBT and LGBT+ groups respectively.

Although leading LGBT charity Stonewall advocate that allies should be welcome, LGBT youth charity The Proud Trust note that LGBT+ young people may wish the group to be just for them. This can present practical challenges, where attending such a group can risk ‘outing’ its attendees. US research also suggests that, ironically, GSAs can silence sexuality through advice that attendees should not discuss their sexual identity to ensure their safety (Kitchen and Bellini 2013), thus bringing into question the purpose of such groups. Quinlivan (2013) has also argued that if the intent is to provide a safe space for LGBT+ youth, this can position them as ‘abnormal’ or ‘at risk’, thus increasing division between cisgender heterosexual and LGBT+ young people. North American research, however, has been more positive, suggesting that GSAs contribute to a more inclusive, positive school environment for LGBT students (Heck et al 2011, 2013, Marx and Kettrey 2016, Porta et al 2017, Poteat et al 2011, Toomey et al 2012). In the remainder of this chapter, we discuss views on these groups within England.

Research findings

Who are LGBT groups in schools for, and how are they run?

One of the ways in which schools offer support to LGBT+ students is through the provision of school-based LGBT groups. The UK has seen a growth in these groups, which may be linked to the increased visibility of LGBT+ young people, at the same time as there has been a decline in youth services (Cox and Schmuecker 2013, UNISON 2014). As one staff member in Project 1 noted:

“I’m recognising that a number of schools, in the absence of a youth service, which has collapsed, are seeing that there’s a need for LGBT groups” (cited in Formby et al 2016).

Key to the value and effectiveness of such groups is who organises and runs them, the degree to which the school supports the groups and their activities, and who they are perceived to be for. Whilst these groups can be beneficial, they can also be seen as schools merely paying 'lip service' to the needs of their LGBT+ students, and there can be considerably divergent views between school staff and students. In Project 4 (Woodiwiss and Formby 2023), there was a clear lack of clarity about school-based groups, particularly those that form part of what was referred to as 'the Stonewall package'. As a head teacher whose school had established an 'equality group' commented:

"[The group] has always been run on the Stonewall lines of... equality... The advice that we were given very early on is that you can't create gay talk. What you have to do is you've got to create something that's about diversity, about equality... so that you can bring in lots of different people".

This view was supported by another staff member (a teacher), who thought that any group should "definitely" not just be for LGBT+ young people, as she could not "see the point of that. [I] thought we are supposed to be inclusive, opening children's minds". However, whilst bringing all students interested in equality together is not necessarily a bad idea, if this is the only provision for those who (might) identify as LGBT+, there is a danger that their specific needs might not be met, and they continue to be denied what they feel is a safe space within school. In addition, although the equality group was open to all students, the group, and what it did, was not widely known about within the school, and according to students involved, only really came together for specific 'events' that the school felt important:

"We met every time something was happening, I think the first time we met was to do something for the Stonewall competition, I think, and then after that was for some poster campaigns".

As this comment suggests, students were encouraged to engage with an external facing competition, but not anything to do with LGBT history month, for example, which other research (Formby and Woodiwiss 2022) suggests is something many LGBT+ young people would value, and which could contribute to a positive sense of identity and belonging.

One of the key issues around school-based groups is therefore whether they are solely for LGBT+ students - which is what many LGBT+ students say they want, or for all students - which is what many schools (and some students) want. Opening groups up beyond those who identify as LGBT+ can lead to confusion about their purpose, as well as making it more difficult to facilitate LGBT+ peer support in a safe space, which we discuss below.

The beneficial involvement of specialist external LGBT youth service staff within school-based groups has been acknowledged, and thought to be particularly helpful in setting up groups, as well as helping identify what the groups are for, and how they might best support LGBT+ students:

"I run the [school] LGBT club... We used [a local LGBT youth service] to start it up. We got six free sessions and that was amazing... Basically [staff member] and I sat with the pupils who came to the LGBT group, and we asked them 'what do you want to change in school', essentially, and it was like opening a floodgate. There were so

many things. There were some really shocking things that I had to follow up really quickly in regard to teacher attitudes, things like that... From there the [external service] really helped us to establish the core base of the group, you know, pupils who were really really interested and felt really listened to, early on... I was more of an observer at that point... seeing how he kept them all engaged and active... We absolutely wouldn't have been able to do it as well as we do without them... It established the group in a way where it was so easy for me to go and take over" (school staff member cited in Formby and Woodiwiss 2022)

"He [external youth worker] adds a bit of direction to it. I feel like he doesn't have to be there all the time for us to function, because now we're like an established group, but I think, especially back in the beginning and stuff, when he came in every other week or so... he was really good for setting us on a bit of a course, about what the group was for and what it was about and stuff" (young person cited in Formby and Woodiwiss 2021).

In Project 3 (Formby and Woodiwiss 2022), school-based LGBT groups had not always been maintained, and it was not clear if this was because the external support available to 'kickstart' the provision had come to an end (as agreed), or linked to the pandemic. Either way, there was a sense among LGBT+ young people that provision related to LGBT+ identities was not prioritised within school:

"We had an LGBT club at school, it isn't happening at the moment... and I've asked them multiple times why it's not happening, and they haven't given me a reason... When we had [external support] coming into school and talking to people at school specifically, like doing the LGBT club, I think that was helpful, and [they] said 'we're not going to do it the entire time, school have to carry it on', and school didn't carry it on... It feels to me like a lot of the other things that are happening they see as more important".

Similarly, in Project 2 (Formby 2019), a young person highlighted that she had found her experience of a school-based LGBT group positive, albeit short-lived, but she explained that what for her was an important acknowledgment of her existence, was misunderstood by the school:

"There was an LGBT club for about three months, and it got quietly shut down by staff members because they thought it was causing too much, talk I suppose... Their excuse was that it was making the LGBT community in the school feel on show, almost, like a circus, because straight people would come in and talk about it as well, which invoked a really nice sense of community, but I think that they took it the wrong way".

Whilst some students were concerned that provision related to their (non-normative) identities was not prioritised, others felt that the group, and their own (multiple) identities, were not fully understood or acknowledged within school. One person, for instance, highlighted how school staff may hold some misperceptions, or a lack of understanding, about intersectionality, in suggesting that someone could not be both autistic and gay:

“They [the school] had an LGBT group... and I was also in the special needs area... and I would try and go to LGBT group because I had friends that were there, and... then they were trying to ban me from going in there because I already had support from the special needs unit... They’d be like ‘you can’t go in there, you have support from us, you’re taking away support from actually gay people’, and I was like... ‘I am gay though!’, and they were like ‘no, you’re autistic’... [In the end] I just stopped going to anywhere really, I just hid in the bathrooms and cried” (cited in Formby and Woodiwiss 2022).

Although some young people lamented the loss of their school-based LGBT group, others described how their school group did not seem to be engaged with by young LGBT+ people:

“I don’t know anyone who actually goes to it [the LGBT group]” (cited in Formby and Woodiwiss 2022).

This does not mean that young LGBT+ people do not want to spend time together, but that they do not necessarily feel this needs to be in a group designed for LGBT+ people or focused on ‘issues’ perceived to affect them. It might be that for some, there are other opportunities where they can meet up with LGBT+ young people, but without that being the focus, as this exchange demonstrates:

“There is an LGBT group on at lunchtime, but it’s the same day as the socialist club, so all the gays just go to that, and basically we have our own LGBT group...”

“...which is saying something, but we have our own network... so you get that socialist stuff whilst also interacting with people who are like you... [but] LGBT group... you already know all the stuff, they’re not going to teach you anything new...

“...[and] all the gay people are going to be there [at socialist club]!” (cited in Formby and Woodiwiss 2022).

Having said that, the presence of a number of other LGBT+ students at these different groups and activities was said to be important, and contributed to their sense of belonging, as well as an identity not focused solely on being LGBT+. Young people we talked to also discussed meeting people ‘like them’ (see also Formby 2017) amongst those interested in theatre, for example, or amongst smokers and those with dyed hair. These interests/habits were viewed as indicators that people were “part of the [LGBT] community”. Though the reference to smoking may be of concern from a public health perspective, the implication here is that LGBT+ young people may be able to find each other outside of school-based LGBT groups.

Education beyond the formal curriculum

It is clear that LGBT+ students particularly value the content and discussions that can be had within school-based LGBT groups, offering as they do the opportunity to learn and talk about things that are often not covered within the formal curriculum:

“I like the discussions we end up having” (cited in Formby and Woodiwiss 2020)

“It was just a nice place to discuss our thoughts and feelings about our sexuality, and how we deal with it and things like that... It fosters understanding “ (cited in Formby 2019).

As well as informal discussion with others attending the groups, students also valued the opportunity to learn and access information within the group:

“We have a wonderful LGBT+ society run by students, from which I have learnt 100 times more than from school” (cited in Formby et al 2016).

Groups were seen to be particularly helpful in providing access to a range of information and advice that was missing or not available elsewhere:

“We learnt about safe sex...”

“...and chemsex and all that, and how we can support people who do that because they’re going to do it anyway, so it’s teaching you to be safe, and how to be safe in any other types of sex” (cited in Formby and Woodiwiss 2020).

This form of education was not just of benefit to themselves, as the information was also used by young people to provide help and advice to others:

“Through learning about safe sex... I’ve been able to help friends with it and stuff like that... when they had issues with it, and [I] give them advice” (cited in Formby and Woodiwiss 2020).

Information about sex and relationships was seen as important, given well-documented weaknesses in formal sex and relationships education for LGBT+ young people (Formby 2011, Formby and Donovan 2020), but so too was mental health. This is not because identifying as LGBT+ was seen as a mental health issue in itself, but in recognition that living as someone who identifies as LGBT+ can result in poor mental health, as result of societal and individual responses to these identities (Formby 2015). In one research group, there was an exchange that demonstrated a shared view that although mental health and wellbeing was discussed, it could be talked about more, and in more depth, not only as a response to poor mental health, but also in terms of addressing issues before they become problematic:

“I think we could talk about mental health more, actually...”

“...I would definitely...”

“...We really only talk about it if one of us is brave enough and stands up and says something’s not right, but we have those days when we don’t want to talk about it, but it should still be there because that gives us more, like, hope, or some bravery to speak about it...”

“...I think, like, growing up LGBTQ, everybody has their moment, a lot of people have a moment when they hate themselves...”

“...‘Why couldn’t I just be normal?’...

“...So to talk about that, would be helpful...

“...Maybe it would be helpful if we talked about how we feel bad... and [if] enough people share their stories, and then we can say how we can prevent it...

“...Recently I’ve been down a lot and some days I don’t even want to get out of bed, because I feel like what’s the point about it all, [but] I get up and I put a smile on my face even though it’s not what I’m feeling, like, inside... It helps to know that people are like me, just to even, to know that there’s people to go to” (cited in Formby and Woodiwiss 2020).

Information sharing, talking, and offering advice and support were identified as important to support good mental health, but so too were practical activities, as this example from a young person attests:

“Last week [staff member] set up a positivity box, where we write down something that we’ve liked about this session, or this person or something... and we write it down every week and we put it in, and then at the end of the year we’ll take them out and read them all... I think that’s a good way to positively increase mental health” (cited in Formby and Woodiwiss 2020).

A place to talk about things that were important to them, and which might be very personal, sensitive, or difficult was identified as valuable by many LGBT+ young people. However, for this to be effective and trusted, it needed to happen in a place that was, and was felt to be, safe, and this was not always the case within a school-based LGBT group.

Safe space, and peer support

Key to how staff and students viewed school-based groups was to some extent influenced by whether or not they were for only LGBT+ people, and thus the degree to which they were seen, and felt, to be safe. The idea of a safe space comes up repeatedly in research:

“I think that personally giving somebody a safe space... is quite important for making students feel a little bit more comfortable... It gives students an understanding that, 1) they’re not any different from anybody else, and 2) that they’re not the only one, and that there are people who would be willing to support them” (cited in Formby 2019)

“We’re like one big family and we meet up every [weekday] lunchtime... We discuss and talk about the different types of gender, sexuality, and make sure it’s clear to everybody what each individual thing is. It’s really important for each person within the group, if they want to have a label, because it makes them comfortable with having something to say, ‘I am this and that’s how it goes’ kind of thing” (cited in Formby et al 2016).

However, there was also an acknowledgement that having an LGBT group at school could pose certain difficulties, particularly around confidentiality and students being 'outed' or 'outing themselves':

"It is a tough one, because quite a few people for instance would like an LGBT group in their school, so you know that there is that safe place... but then a couple of people don't like that because you kind of then are outing yourself at school, and someone could know" (cited in Formby 2019).

Whilst this might not be an issue in some schools, in a school environment that was not felt to be supportive, it would require at least some people to be visibly 'out':

"The thing is, if no-one's out you'd need someone who's gay firstly, because [without that] then it's just a straight alliance... It sounds stupid but you'd actually just need like a few people who are like gay... and you would have to have some straight people in there just for numbers and stuff. I've never really thought about it because I just, I never thought it was a possibility" (cited in Formby 2019)

"The thing is with creating a group for people to come, there's going to be a lot of idiots who come in just to mock them, just mock the group in general..." (cited in Woodiwiss and Formby 2023)

"...Yeah, because people would lie about it and just tag along to listen, and then spread it around the school" (cited in Woodiwiss and Formby 2023).

When school-based groups were discussed, participants identified the value of information sharing and advice (as above), but they also highlighted the importance of having a safe space, and of having fun:

"[Groups] just need to be made quite fun and stuff, where everyone can get involved and it's like people feel safe there... I think that staff are important, but I don't think it should be, like, really strict. I think it should be that people feel it's a fun atmosphere, and I don't think that anyone would come to cause any problems, but obviously if they did then they could be disciplined by a higher authority in the school" (cited in Formby 2019).

LGBT+ young people clearly value groups specifically for them for a variety of reasons. However, one of the most important and valued aspect of school-based LGBT groups appeared to be the sense of being with people 'like me', as this exchange demonstrates:

"It's the sense of being around people that are like me, people I can rant to..."

"...We all have something in common..."

"...the sense of community..."

"...I feel, like, a lot more connected with LGBT people, I feel more confident..."

“...Because we’re all in the same boat, we know that we’re all like-minded, so... I know that nobody would do to me what [others do]” (cited in Formby and Woodiwiss 2020).

These comments all indicate the importance of a sense of similarity, ‘normality’ and/or community for LGBT+ people (see also Formby 2017), and the positive effect this can have on young people’s wellbeing and sense of belonging, as well as their feeling that there is nothing ‘wrong’ with them:

“You feel more normal” (cited in Formby and Woodiwiss 2020).

This indicates that a key element of these groups is that they are solely for LGBT+ young people, which perhaps calls into question the popular GSA model in North America, which also includes cisgender heterosexual people.

Whatever their membership base, school-based groups can be vitally important for those who do not have access to an LGBT youth group outside of school (whether due to lack of availability locally, or a lack of transport to attend). They have at least the potential to provide a space (and sometimes the only space) in which young people can discuss their experiences, as these young people describe:

“There are quite a lot of us who come and hang out, but quite a lot of the time we do talk about some issues while we’re [hanging out]...

“...like struggles we’ve had, like bad experiences, because all of us had some pretty bad experiences and bullying and things, so we talked about that...

“...We exchange stories about what’s gone on and try and give advice on what to do” (cited in Formby and Woodiwiss 2020).

School-based groups are also identified as positive spaces that facilitate friendship formation, peer support, and information sharing, all of which contribute to LGBT+ young people’s wellbeing:

“I like the friends I’ve made from it, that I wouldn’t have met otherwise, because they’re in very different years, or I don’t have any classes with them...

“...I had no friends before this group, so it’s given me people who I can trust and talk to...

“...It’s made me more open to talk about how crap the school is” (cited in Formby and Woodiwiss 2020).

Such spaces are also important in supporting identity affirmation, and indeed for some young people these spaces are the only ones where their gender identity, pronouns and names are used and acknowledged:

“There’s quite a few people in this room, I think, who go by names or pronouns that they don’t necessarily go by at home or outside of this room, and it’s very important to have a place where you can... It helps you decide whether that name or pronoun is right for you, without having to be unsafe... To have that personal choice is very empowering, where you can use it in a certain setting and never have anyone that you don’t want to find out find out...”

“...I recently started going by a different name in this room, and the reason I only go by it in this room is because, like, in Year 9 I tried to go by it, and nobody honoured it whatsoever. They literally told me ‘no’ to my face... Now that I’ve been here... people are using it, and it’s just that feeling of, like, people understanding and using what you want them to use, without any sort of question of ‘oh well why?’, or like, ‘no I’m not going [to]’” (cited in Formby and Woodiwiss 2020).

Participants here were clear that they felt safe within the school-based group, which was contrasted with their experiences of the wider school environment:

“I get misgendered constantly, and like I don’t feel comfortable saying like ‘oh actually...’, whereas in here I can be like ‘don’t, I’m not a female’” (cited in Formby and Woodiwiss 2020).

This positive impact on LGBT+ young people was also noted by school staff:

“Pupils [involved in the school LGBT group] just have so much more confidence, and they know that school accepts them and they’re not afraid of speaking up... Those pupils I think are much more confident being themselves in school, they’re not masking or trying to hide who they are, so they’re not having to think about that alongside thinking about their education” (cited in Formby and Woodiwiss 2022).

Whilst most participants stressed impacts on young people related to social and emotional benefits, one teacher explicitly highlighted perceived impacts on educational engagement and achievement:

“What we’ve noticed, is that for the pupils who go [to the school LGBT group]... it’s had a really positive impact on them within education, within their classrooms. They’re more confident... They are more willing to share their opinions, ideas, perspectives, but also in their grades they’re actually, their target grades are improving because they’re more engaged in lessons... We’re seeing real development there” (cited in Formby and Woodiwiss 2022).

Conclusions

In this chapter we have discussed some challenges and complexities related to the provision of LGBT groups in schools. Whilst they have the potential to benefit LGBT+ young people – and contribute to the pastoral ‘offer’ within schools – a number of issues need to be considered to ensure that they operate for the benefit of those attending them. These issues include: who the groups are run *for* and *by*; levels of school engagement with local LGBT-specific youth services (where they are available); group-based activities and content; ensuring a sense of confidentiality and safety for LGBT+ students. Whilst a willingness to

offer support to LGBT+ young people suggests increasing awareness, care needs to be taken to avoid the suggestion that all LGBT+ young people automatically ‘need support’, which can be understood by LGBT+ youth as pathologising and apportioning blame (Formby 2013, Woodiwiss and Formby 2023). It can also mean that “heteronormative discourses are reinforced while representations of same-sex desire are abnormalized” (Quinlivan 2002, 22).

It is important that groups empower young LGBT+ people, whilst not allowing schools to merely pay ‘lip service’, or (be perceived to) pass their responsibilities onto students, as previous research indicates can happen (Formby et al 2016). Although youth-led groups are often seen as the ideal, they can leave young people feeling unsupported, and/or accountable for LGBT+ pastoral care at their school (Formby et al 2016). Growth in the provision of LGBT groups in schools may be a positive step in supporting non-normative identities, offering advice, and/or providing information, but care needs to be taken to ensure that they are not (seen to be) operating in isolation and/or without appropriate external or staff/school support. This may be a difficult balance for schools to strike: to support and facilitate student-led activities, at the same time as not appearing to suggest that the school and its leadership team are not interested or willing to engage.

Where successful, however, school-based LGBT groups can facilitate significant peer support, and a sense of (LGBT) community, as well as providing an important source of education that takes place outside the formal/classroom-based curriculum, often related to LGBT-inclusive sex and relationships education, in a safe and comfortable space. These groups provide an opportunity to affirm people’s (LGBT+) identities, within wider environments that are not always known to be affirming for LGBT+ people. This in turn can aid pupil self-confidence, and even educational engagement and achievement (Formby and Woodiwiss 2022). However, evidence would suggest that this might best be achieved in LGBT+ only groups, rather than GSAs or other non-LGBT+ specific groups. In a context of shrinking (or shrunk) youth service provision (Cox and Schmuecker 2013, UNISON 2014), and stretched mental health services for young people (Crenna-Jennings and Hutchinson 2020), it is unsurprising that schools may feel the burden of support, so it is imperative that this is evidence-based, and that they are sufficiently supported. Whilst schools may be hesitant to engage with external LGBT-specific groups and services, research suggests that this can have a very positive impact on school-based groups, and how they are experienced by young LGBT+ people. In conclusion, we would suggest that whilst LGBT groups for young people can play an important part in young people’s pastoral care within schools, this can only happen if those young people are at the centre of such provision.

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