

*'I just want to feel like I'm part of everyone else.' How schools unintentionally contribute to the isolation of students who identify as LGBT+*

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# 'I just want to feel like I'm part of everyone else': how schools unintentionally contribute to the isolation of students who identify as LGBT+

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the experiences of students who identify as LGBT+ in six secondary schools in the south of England. Drawing mainly on data from five student focus groups, one student interview and nine teacher interviews, supplemented by a survey of staff and a review of school policy documents, this study examines how schools unwittingly increase LGBT+ students' sense of isolation. Using a framework that identifies different forms of isolation, this study found that use of gendered spaces, the creation of 'safe' spaces such as support groups and the school curriculum can exacerbate students' feelings of isolation, despite the good intentions of schools. Understanding how schools (unwittingly) contribute to LGBT+ students' sense of isolation potentially provides a means to identify more specific ways schools could address this issue.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

LGBT+ students; isolation; support groups; secondary schools

## Introduction

This paper examines the ways schools can often and unwittingly contribute to LGBT+ students' sense of isolation. Although the policy context for the LGBT+ community has generally improved recently within the UK, this paper explores issues that LGBT+ youngsters still encounter in secondary schools. The concept of isolation, as outlined by Johnson and Amella (2014), is used to make sense of data drawn from six secondary schools in the south of England, as well as the ways in which schools fail to address adequately the isolation experienced by LGBT+ students, or understand its extent. Prior to data collection, an initial literature review highlighted issues around gendered spaces (i.e. toilets and changing rooms), the existence of support groups as 'safe' spaces (and the extent to which they are safe) and the curriculum; these themes helped to initially inform the study's focus. However, through data analyses, especially of student focus group data, a theme of isolation kept emerging. This prompted a re-analysis of data around an isolation framework (Johnson & Amella, 2014), forming the basis of this article.

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## Literature review

This literature review firstly provides a brief outline of the changing policy context for the LGBT+ community in the UK. Generally, policies have moved in a more positive direction, but not for all. The second section looks at the evidence of the experience of LGBT+ youngsters in schools, which presents a mixed picture. It also briefly highlights the types of interventions schools have adopted and the impact of these on LGBT+ students. The final section looks at the association between being LGBT+ and mental health, in particular, the concern around the effects of isolation, and the different ways in which LGBT+ youngsters can be made to feel isolated.

### *The LGBT+ community and the changing policy context*

In some ways the position of the LGBT+ community in the UK has improved considerably over the past decade, at least regarding recent policy changes. In the 1980s and 1990s, government policy helped to create a generally hostile environment for the LGBT+ community. In part, this was due to the government policy around HIV and AIDS, which served to stigmatise the LGBT+ community, but also included legislation which affected education. Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act, in particular, stated that Local Authorities should not ‘promote’ teaching about homosexuality in schools as a ‘pretended family relationship’. The phrasing of this piece of legislation was quite ambiguous, as it was unclear what was meant by ‘promoting’, but it did make many schools and teachers reluctant to discuss issues related to sexuality (White, Magrath, & Thomas, 2018). The 2010 Equalities Act, however, seems to mark a significant change in government attitude. This Act brought together many pieces of legislation designed to protect individual rights and to promote equality of opportunity for all. Of particular note was the designation of ‘protected characteristics’, including gender reassignment and sexual orientation. This means that all services, including schools, are legally obliged to make reasonable adjustments to promote equality of opportunity and protect individuals from discrimination. This shift in the policy landscape is evident in other legislation, e.g. in 2013 same-sex marriages were legalised in England and Wales. There has also been a change in expectations regarding sex education (now Relationships and Sex Education) in schools in that the most recent DfE guidance specifically mentions the need to teach about LGBT+ matters:

At the point at which schools consider it appropriate to teach their pupils about LGBT, they should ensure that this content is fully integrated into their programmes of study for this area of the curriculum rather than delivered as a stand-alone 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, p. 15)

However, the climate for trans people recently has become increasingly hostile with the development of the so-called ‘TERF (Trans-exclusionary radical feminists) wars’ and the contested changes in the UK to the Gender Recognition Act (2004) (GRA). The debate in the UK has largely centred on the process by which trans people can change the sex marker on their birth certificates to reflect their gender identity. Trans campaigners have been arguing that the process be one of self-determination, getting rid of the need for evidence such as a medical diagnosis of gender dysphoria and proof of living in one’s preferred gender for two years (see Pearce, Erikainen, & Vincent, 2020). The changes

made to the GRA, however, have only made the process less expensive and allowed for an online application, rather than addressing the issue of self-determination of one's gender identity.

Although there have been generally positive shifts in official attitudes towards the LGBT+ community, the research on the lived experience of LGBT+ students in schools presents a mixed picture.

### ***The experience of LGBT+ students in secondary education***

Hines (2010) acknowledges there is a need to understand more fully how LGBT+ community members navigate the complexities of society, particularly within schools, especially as the existing research presents seemingly contradictory findings.

Some studies identify a very positive picture of LGBT+ youth acceptance in schools (McCormack & Anderson, 2010; Morris, McCormack, & Anderson, 2014; White et al., 2018). These studies provide detailed qualitative insights into young people's experiences and suggest there is a significant cultural shift in attitudes towards LGBT+ matters amongst young people. White et al. (2018) even claim that homophobia itself is stigmatised in schools rather than homosexuality, whilst McCormack and Anderson (2010) found that prevailing attitudes in the educational institutions in their study were pro-gay. It is however hard to generalise as these studies tend to be small-scale, are often focused on single institutions and explore the stories of either homosexual or bisexual males, rather than the full range of LGBT+ experience. In addition, negative attitudes towards homosexuality and non-gender conforming identities may coexist with a fear of being stigmatised as homophobic. Power structures in schools may still emphasise heterosexuality and gender-conformity as a desirable norm.

In contrast, other studies highlight significant issues facing LGBT+ youngsters in schools. Vega, Crawford, and Van Pelt's (2012) study found that 61% of respondents felt unsafe in their school and 90% had experienced some form of harassment as a consequence of identifying as LGBT+. National surveys in the US and UK (e.g. GLSEN, 2018 ; Stonewall, 2017) do highlight an improving picture for LGBT+ students, but nonetheless show room for significant improvement. For example, Stonewall (2017), drawing on the experiences of around 3700 LGBT+ , reported that approximately 50% were bullied, 68% said that teachers did not challenge the use of inappropriate language and 40% were never taught anything about LGBT+ matters. The Stonewall report (2017) also suggests that trans or gender non-conforming students experience much greater levels of victimisation and suffer from greater mental health issues than their LGB peers. This probably reflects the often visible nature of gender non-conformity (Miller & Grollman, 2015).

These national surveys, conducted by LGBT+ campaigning groups, have, however, been criticised for their methodological approaches, the claims they make, and their focus on LGBT+ students as victims (McCormack, 2020). They do, however, present a different perspective to a number of academic studies. This contradiction between these types of studies raises important questions about the nature of young LGBT+ students' school experiences and highlights the need for further study. There is a concern that many LGBT+ students find schools unsafe and do not enjoy their education. This is highlighted in some small-scale academic studies. For example, Formby (2015) shows the

negative attitudes LGBT+ students encounter from teachers and are often positioned as victims. Negative school experience can lead to poorer academic outcomes, which in turn can impact the professional future and life quality of young LGBT+ people (see Vega et al., 2012).

To support LGBT+ students, schools have taken steps to try to improve the educational experience for this group. Many interventions focus on policies around bullying, use of gendered spaces (toilets and sport-related changing facilities, e.g. Slater, Jones, & Procter, 2018), provision of support groups as 'safe' spaces and a more inclusive curriculum (e.g. Kosciw, Palmer, Kull, & Greytak, 2013; Russell, Horn, Kosciw, & Saewyc, 2010). Analyses, especially in the quantitative studies (which are often in the US) identify a positive correlation between such interventions and LGBT+ students' experience of school. However, these quantitative studies are often unable to comment on the nature/quality of the interventions, which means it is difficult to draw any strong conclusions about how such interventions work. Smaller scale, qualitative studies, such as Formby (2015), provide more specific insight into LGBT+ students' experiences. Formby (2015) questions the benefit of well-intentioned interventions, for example, requiring known lesbian/gay students to change for physical education classes removed from their peers, whilst Hope and Hall (2018) challenge the notion of creating so-called 'safe' spaces, arguing that being safe is not enough and that students need an environment in which to thrive.

### ***LGBT+ students and mental health issues***

A number of medical and psychological studies demonstrate a relationship between LGBT+ identity and engagement in risky behaviours. For example, Seelman, Woodford, and Nicolazzo (2017) found that incidents of victimisation and microaggressions were associated with lower levels of self-esteem amongst LGBT+ college students. Seelman's (2016) and Miller and Grollman's (2015) studies of the experiences of transgender and gender non-conforming college students and adults found that these groups were at higher risk of suicide and health-harming behaviours as a result of victimisation. Stone et al. (2014) found that sexual minority youths tended to have increased risk of suicide ideation, planning and attempts. These findings, linking severe mental health problems with individuals who identify as LGBT+, are consistent across many studies. Of added concern is the connection between victimisation in someone's youth and lifelong mental health issues (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2006); this link indicates it is imperative that schools provide appropriate, effective support for LGBT+ students so they are less likely to encounter mental health issues throughout their lives.

A significant factor in this heightened degree of risk is social isolation. Young people with small social networks generally experience more depressive symptoms (Falci & McNeely, 2009), suggesting that isolation is a contributing factor to poor mental health. Hussong et al. (2020), using social network analysis, also found a relationship between low social status and integration and risky behaviours. If social isolation is a major factor in poor mental health and well-being, then LGBT+ youth in particular are likely to experience 'greater feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, worthlessness, alienation, and extreme loneliness' (Williams, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2005, p. 472), as a result of 'a hostile social environment characterized by stigma, prejudice and discrimination' (Stone et al., 2014, p. 262).

However, studies conducted in relation to the LGBT+ community and isolation are largely drawn from the psychology field. Research into the ways schools contribute to students' sense of isolation is rare (e.g. Murray, 2011). There is thus a need to examine this area more carefully.

Additionally, Johnson and Amella (2014) argue that isolation needs clearer conceptualisation to be useful in identifying those at most risk of poor mental health. They identify five dimensions (and four sub-dimensions) that clarify how isolation may manifest itself in LGBT+ youth:

- Social isolation;
  - Lack of social support/network;
  - No [or limited] contact with wider LGBT+ community;
  - Social withdrawal – where, for example, fear of rejection, leads to self-isolation;
  - Victimisation;
- Emotional isolation – lack of affection and emotional detachment from family and friends;
- Cognitive isolation – lack of access to information about LGBT+ matters;
- Identity concealment – seeking to conform to heteronormative and/or cisgendered patterns of behaviour;
- Aware of self as different – in this situation individuals are aware they don't 'fit in'.

Clearly this outline contains elements that are interconnected, e.g. emotional isolation would appear to contribute to social isolation. This framework, however, provides an interesting approach to conceptualising ways in which LGBT+ individuals can experience isolation in secondary schools. Although written by medical professionals, Johnson and Amella's (2014) framework potentially offers a nuanced way to explore how educational settings may create and/or reinforce LGBT+ students' sense of isolation, and therefore corresponding ways to address this.

Drawing on the literature examined there is clearly dispute around the experience of LGBT+ students in schools, and the impact of attempts to support these students (such as use of gendered spaces, provision of support groups/'safe' spaces, and curriculum inclusion). This paper explores these issues through the lens of isolation, based around the following questions:

- How do LGBT+ students' experiences of gendered spaces in schools (i.e. toilets, changing rooms) contribute to a sense of isolation?
- How do LGBT+ students' experiences of support groups as 'safe' spaces in schools contribute to a sense of isolation?
- How do LGBT+ students' experiences of the curriculum in schools contribute to a sense of isolation?

## Methodology

This paper is drawn from a wider study (see Harris, Wilson-Daily, & Fuller, 2021), in which a mixed methods approach was adopted, to explore the culture and climate of six secondary schools from the perspective of staff and students, as well as the extent to



which these schools provided a supportive LGBT+ environment. That study combined data from five student focus groups and one interview (whose participants identified as LGBT+ or as an ‘ally’), a web-based quantitative survey of teachers and staff and follow-up interviews with self-selecting staff who volunteered through the survey. School policy documents were also scrutinised. The research design utilised a mixed methods qualitative priority model (QUAL + quant), in which student focus group data was emphasised and quantitative data played a complementary role (Morse & Niehaus, 2016).

For this paper, most data presented are drawn from the student focus groups and teacher interviews. Where appropriate, additional data from the surveys and school policy documents are included to illustrate key points.

## Participants

Six schools (out of approximately 40 invited) agreed to participate. Reasons for non-participation were not collected. The six schools that engaged in the project were state-maintained; five had students aged 11–18 and one had students aged 14–18.

As seen in Table 1, the five larger schools are similar in terms of size and female/male demographic, but vary in terms of students with English as an additional language (EAL), reflecting the ethnic diversity of the school location, as well as in terms of the number of free meal recipients (considered a crude indicator of levels of poverty within the local area). Schools provided what they considered to be relevant school policy documents (Table 2), which in most cases were the school’s equality and anti-bullying policies. However, one school provided a curriculum policy, and, another, a policy on transgender students. Schools also provided access to a student focus group and the link to an online survey to their teachers and other staff members. Names of schools, focus group participants and interviewees are changed to protect the identities of all participants.

In each school a contact person was designated as a liaison point with the research team. In some schools this was a senior member of staff, responsible for student welfare, whereas in others it was a member of staff with a particular interest or connection with the LGBT+ community.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of participating schools.

	Number of pupils on roll*	% females/males <sup>†</sup>	% of students with some form of SEN (special educational need)	% of students for whom English is an additional language (EAL)	% of students claiming free school meals
Oak Tree	1100	49/51	12	12	14
Yew Tree	1150	51/49	9	23	10
Elm Tree	1000	50/50	17	43	16
Ash Tree	1100	46/54	7	19	12
Rowan Tree	1000	49/51	7	12	7
Fir Tree	450	15/85	15	17	7
National average		50/50	11	17	14

Notes: \* The number of pupils on roll is rounded to the nearest 50. Data drawn from DfE performance tables (DfE, 2019) <https://www.gov.uk/school-performance-tables>; <sup>†</sup> This reports the female/male breakdown of the school population. However, this does not take into account those students who wish to identify as trans, gender fluid or non-binary.

**Table 2.** Policy documents shared by schools relevant to LGBT+ topics and issues.

	Equalities policy	Anti-bullying Policy	Other
Oak Tree	✓	✓(including behaviour policy)	
Yew Tree			Transgender statement
Elm Tree		✓	Equal opportunities pupils' policy
Ash Tree	✓(including Relationship and Sex Education [RSE])	✓	Curriculum policy
Rowan Tree*			
Fir Tree	✓		

Note: \*LGTB+ policy documents under review by school during data collection.

### **Data collection and ethical considerations**

All data were collected in spring and early summer 2019. Five focus groups of LGBT+ students were conducted (in three focus groups 'allies' also attended) – one in each school, with the exception of Oak Tree, where one interview was conducted.<sup>1</sup> Including the interview at Oak Tree, in total data were gathered from 38 students, 32 of whom identified as LGBT+ (Yew Tree = 5 students, Elm Tree = 14,<sup>2</sup> Ash Tree = 4, Rowan Tree = 8, Fir Tree = 6) (Table 3).

The liaison person in the school was asked to invite students to the meeting, given their better knowledge of the students and who would be willing to contribute. The intention was to focus on those students who identified as LGBT+. In Yew Tree, Oak Tree, Elm Tree and Rowan Tree the students were drawn from an in-school support group, so these students knew each other. In two of these cases, a student who identified as an 'ally' wished to be included in the focus group, were already known to the LGBT+ students, and so were invited to attend by the teacher. In Fir Tree, the teacher had chosen to invite students they knew rather than use the school support group; this meant most students who attended the focus group were largely unknown to each other and unaware of how each other identified. At Ash Tree there was no support group from which to draw students. Instead a member of staff invited students whom they thought would be interested; only one of the participants identified as LGBT+, but the other three were all advocates for LGBT+ rights. The focus groups were conducted by one of the research

**Table 3.** Students' self-identification.\*

<b>Sexuality</b>	
Gay	5
Bi	7
Lesbian	5
Pan	6
<b>Gender</b>	
Trans	4
Gender fluid/'ace'	9
<b>Other</b>	
Allies	5
Undisclosed	1

Note: \*The total is more than 38 as some students expressed a gender and a sexuality identity.

team, and apart from the student in Oak Tree, was unknown to the students in the other schools. This researcher identifies as transgender and presented as such to the students in the focus groups.

Given the potentially sensitive nature of the issues to be discussed, ethical approval was gained from the University's ethics committee, and procedures that adhered to the British Educational Research Association's BERA (2018) guidelines were followed. Questions mainly focused on the schools' actions and not individual experiences, to avoid students having to share sensitive personal stories, unless they chose to do so. (see Appendix A for an outline of the indicative questions).

The other main source of data presented in this paper are teacher interviews. Nine teachers from five schools indicated they were willing to be interviewed (two each from Fir Tree, Oak Tree, Rowan Tree and Yew Tree, one from Ash Tree, and none from Elm Tree). The first part of the interview was semi-structured, exploring teachers' perspectives and experiences of LGBT+ matters. The second part used a set of scenarios to examine teachers' attitudes, values and beliefs about LGBT+ related issues in schools.

Where other data (policy documents and survey data from teachers and other support staff<sup>3</sup>) helped to contextualise and/or offer additional insights into the issues identified by students, they are included in the analyses presented in the following sections.

## **Data analysis**

Focus group and interview data were transcribed and then analysed based on themes through deductive and inductive coding; deductive themes were gendered spaces, support groups and the curriculum. Following this initial coding, a process of inductive coding identified isolation as an issue for serious consideration. This code was further developed to identify different forms of isolation, drawing on Johnson and Amella's (2014) conceptualisation of the term. These qualitative data, examining how isolation is experienced by students and perceived (or not) by teachers, are the basis for this paper. Including other issues from the quantitative data was considered beyond the scope of this article.

## **Findings**

### ***How do LGBT+ students' experiences of gendered spaces (toilets, changing rooms) in schools contribute to a sense of isolation?***

Students at Fir Tree raised no issues about access to gendered spaces; the school had gender neutral toilets and students were allowed to use the toilets of their choice (although focus group data revealed trans students at this school did face significant abuse from their peers, citing a recent example of a student being abused in the dining hall at lunchtime by a group of students, when no teacher was present). However, in other schools, gendered spaces offered challenges for many students. Several reported abuse in sports changing rooms, seemingly affecting the whole spectrum of LGBT+ students. For example, in Yew Tree, one of the transgender students who wears a binder across his breasts had to use the girls' changing room, and felt compelled to change in a separate shower room to avoid anyone seeing. Also, one of the boys who

identifies as gay reported extensive bullying, for example, being told he should go to the girls' changing room and being called a 'faggot' by his peers. This student truanted from sports lessons because of this consistent abuse. It seems that there is a great deal of 'policing' of these gendered spaces along heteronormative and cisgendered lines. Also, these spaces, or the LGBT+ students within them, were sexualised in the eyes of their peers. At Elm Tree, students said:

I couldn't really look anywhere but the wall or the ceiling because otherwise people would go 'why are you staring at me, do you like me or something?' And it was a very uncomfortable period.

I'd be in the girls' changing rooms and I'd be literally forced to go into the toilets otherwise people would say I'm perverting on them.

I was getting so many stares and so many looks, and even now I struggle with stuff like that because I am pansexual. But that does not mean you have to come up to me and sexually flirt with me – absolute buffoons!

The struggle to conform to gendered spaces appears to increase LGBT+ students' sense of difference and therefore isolation within school.

This sense of isolation is exacerbated by school policies relating to gendered spaces, especially staff ignorance of these policies. As part of the survey, staff were asked about the availability of gender neutral toilets and whether students (with or without medical treatments to support transition) were able to use the toilets of their choice. Staff at Fir Tree were more aware of the existence of gender neutral toilets, with half (50%) of the teachers/staff surveyed confirming that these toilets were available. Staff at other schools were less aware of policies if they existed (Figure 1).

Teacher awareness as to whether school policy allowed trans students to use the toilets they felt comfortable using was low. For example, in Yew Tree, the only school where policy documents expressly included references to gender neutral toilet spaces and case-by-case toilet preference, only 29.4% of teachers/staff were aware of the former (Figure 1) and 17.6% of the latter (Figure 2).

Staff attitudes towards transgender and binary non-conforming students varied, and appeared to reflect either a lack of training or a poor understanding of the issues facing such students. Ray (Rowan Tree) was very confident in LGB issues due to his personal

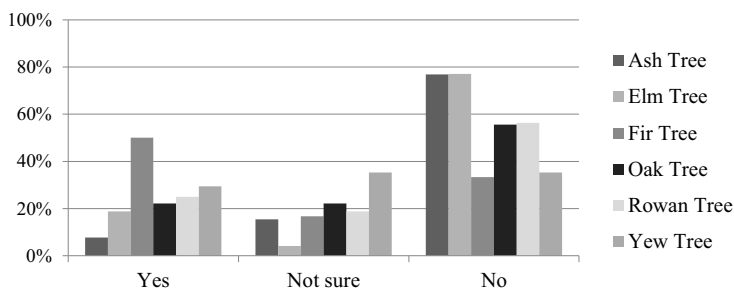
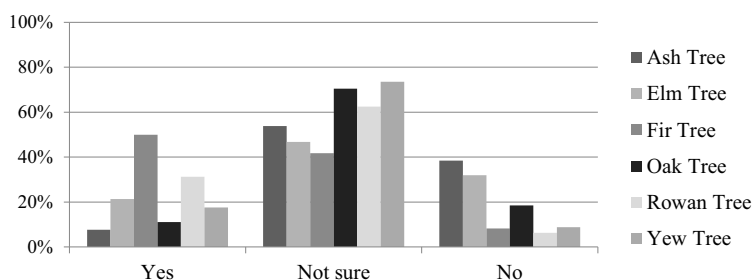


Figure 1. Teacher/staff impression of gender neutral toilet availability.



**Figure 2.** Teacher/staff impression of ‘Students are allowed to use toilets they feel comfortable in’.

experiences, yet admitted his ignorance of trans issues meant he was unclear on what was appropriate for matters such as use of toilets and changing rooms. When asked whether trans students should be allowed to use the toilet of their preference he replied:

I’m not very for gendered toilets anyway, a toilet is a toilet. I’m not too sure and I’m not trans so I don’t know what is best for that person.

Tom (Fir Tree) similarly felt uncertain about answering such questions. Helen (Yew Tree) was more forthright:

That’s another very very very very very controversial, difficult question to answer . . . . If it was my child I would speak to my child. Ok, you can be who want to be at home but in school you have to maintain this role play for a while because it makes life easier. Otherwise, I don’t want my child to be in confrontation.

Liam (Ash Tree) believed no gender neutral spaces should be provided for students. Instead transgender students had to ‘accept biology’ and live with the body they were born with. He felt being transgender was a mental health issue and students should be counselled to love their bodies and not change them. Such views are only likely to make some students feel more isolated, especially given the position of authority teachers hold.

There were, however, schools or individuals within those schools who were being more proactive and supportive. Yew Tree was the only school that had a specific policy for transgender students. Not only does the school have gender neutral toilet spaces, but the policy document also states students can use the toilet of their preferred identity following discussions and decisions made on a case-by-case basis. Their uniform policy also allows students to wear clothing aligning with their preferred gender, although again this is considered case by case. The policy also includes guidance on the use of preferred names and rooming policy on residential trips (when students often share rooms/dormitories) as well as offers advice on physical education (PE) and when it would be possible for students to play sports associated with their preferred gender. The policy does acknowledge that there are limits on what is possible, e.g. students under the age of 16 cannot legally change their name without parental consent. The school also recognises there may be sensitivities for non-trans students that need to be taken into consideration; however, what this ‘consideration’ looks like in practice is unclear. Unfortunately, as mentioned earlier, few staff at Yew Tree were aware of this policy. Also, the fact that cases are addressed on an individual basis means that LGBT+ students will potentially feel ‘singled out’ and different.

In other schools, particular staff were strong advocates for transgender students. In Rowan Tree, Mary, who has a close family member who is transgender, explained how she supported and worked with students to make school work for them:

We have a young person at the moment who identifies as transgender . . . I met with him and his mum when he was still in year six, so before he started with us, to look at the practical issues like toilets that he felt comfortable to use, whether he wanted, he felt comfortable to do boys' PE rather than girls' PE because they do slightly different sports and just to work out those practical issues to make sure that he felt comfortable.

She also highlighted the challenges of name changes: the local education authority had insisted that school registers use legal birth names, which the school vigorously disputed and won the right to use a student's preferred name. On the surface this presents a very proactive approach to supporting transgender students, but the existence of gendered toilets and changing spaces and separate sports for boys and girls raises questions, such as, for example, how transgender students are helped to feel safe if they choose to use the gender specific space that aligns with their experienced gender and the place of non-binary students and how they are supposed to 'fit in'.

### ***How do LGBT+ students' experiences of support groups as 'safe' spaces in schools contribute to a sense of isolation?***

All of the schools involved in the study, except Ash Tree, had created support groups for their LGBT+ students and any allies. Some of the groups were newly formed, with some established only during the 2018–2019 academic year. Oak Tree's 'Identity' group has existed for a number of years, so was a stronger presence in the school, with its own display board advertising LGBT+ events. At Fir Tree, Tom, a teacher interviewed, felt the 'equalities council' was very effective, in part because it is largely student led, with teacher support (which was the case in all the schools), yet most of the students in Fir Tree's focus group were unaware of the existence of this support group.

For students, the existence of a support group was generally seen as positive. At Oak Tree students often referred to their group as a second family, offering a non-judgemental space where they could be themselves. This particular support group was unusual as staff members, who openly identified as LGBT+, would also attend. The presence of visible role models clearly impacted students positively. It is clear that such groups can counter isolation through the friendships offered. The teachers who support them (and often there are only one or two significant teachers involved) are seen as incredibly valuable.

Mrs R is a godsend! (Rowan Tree)

And with teachers that do understand, if anything goes wrong, it's always Miss D you go to. (Yew Tree)

Mainly Miss P. She is the only one that really talks about this with us. (Elm Tree)

There was universal praise for these particular staff. Their presence and support was a welcome boost to many LGBT+ students' senses of self and well-being.

However, the presence of a support group is not without its problems. One of the students at Yew Tree described her experience of a support group at a previous school:

They set up their LGBT club/support group thing and I went once and then I never went again because the amount of people that were there just to see who is different in school . . . just want to take the mick out of people who are there . . . was immense and that's why I don't go into things like that.

This experience was not uncommon. In two schools the support group moved because it met in rooms with large numbers of windows opening onto a playground, which meant other students could look in and see who attended. Several students expressed fear that support group attendance would out them to the wider school community, thereby furthering concerns about safety. One girl from Rowan Tree, who identified as bisexual, described how for weeks she would walk round and round the building where the meeting was being held debating whether to go in. Her indecision was purely based on the reaction of her peer group:

They would make comments like 'faggot', 'gay club', things like that . . . I would always hear people going 'oh you're so gay' and that's what made it hard for me. Especially the girls because they're very judgemental of people and so I was scared to come out.

There is therefore a potential stigma attached to belonging to a support group. Attending a group is often a visible way of being out. Hence in some places students chose not to join these groups out of fear and a sense of vulnerability. For example, at Fir Tree, a female student who identified as bisexual said:

I just feel like more people are going to find out who is part of the LGBT and then when people know, make fun of them and things. Because assemblies . . . people are already being made fun of and if there was a club where everyone together it would just make it worse.

This raises a number of issues. Such groups can provide a 'safe' space, but if the wider school environment is not seen as a 'safe' space, then attendance at a support group can be deeply problematic. Various data collected in this study indicate that some schools appear to have a hostile culture towards the LGBT+ community. Students at Yew Tree and Ash Tree were unsure whether any staff were part of the LGBT+ community; this seemed to reflect the general atmosphere in the schools. Also, the survey data shows LGBT+ teachers in some schools, such as Ash Tree, seemed unwilling to be out at school. There were staff at Ash Tree that reported identifying as LGBT+; *however*, very few of their colleagues were aware of any out LGBT+ colleague. One student at Ash Tree described the school's culture as 'toxic masculinity', thus deterring students from identifying as LGBT+.

### ***How do LGBT+ students' experiences of the curriculum in schools contribute to a sense of isolation?***

Feedback from the student focus groups all highlighted significant concerns about the school curriculum. LGBT+ topics were largely absent from the curriculum, contributing to a sense of isolation. Students in Rowan Tree appreciated the school was bringing more LGBT+ content into the Citizenship curriculum, but the general feeling was 'we don't get taught enough about it'. This was a common experience across all schools. Students were

only able to recollect LGBT+ content being occasionally included, citing one or two examples from an entire year's teaching. Unfortunately, some attempts to incorporate LGBT+ examples into the curriculum were negatively received because of the way it positioned the LGBT+ community. For example, students at Elm Tree were taught about the persecution of homosexuals in Nazi Germany, which merely created a victim narrative of LGBT+ individuals, in need of protection (see Formby, 2015). LGBT+-related content was more a feature of some subjects for students aged 16+ and studying for their A levels, e.g. it was included in areas such as Art, English Literature, Sociology and Psychology. Although this was warmly welcomed, the students would have appreciated this integration at an earlier age.

Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) is another issue. Many of the students complained about the heteronormative and cisgendered approach to RSE. Those in Rowan Tree felt the situation was improving in their school, as they were allowed to feed into the curriculum. For example, some of the students in the support group had been asked whether they thought additional materials for sex education lessons for students aged 11–12 were needed; in other schools the students felt their needs and concerns were neglected and ignored.

The staff survey showed huge variation in staff awareness of attempts to include LGBT+ topics/issues in the curriculum. Between 38.5% (in Ash Tree) and 75% (in Rowan Tree) were aware of steps to such material. In most cases, schools use Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE), Citizenship and/or Religious Education as a vehicle for teaching LGBT+ topics. This is appropriate but does raise additional issues. These subjects tend to focus on personal and societal issues, which would clearly include issues relating to the LGBT+ community. However, these subjects are often associated with examining 'controversial' or 'difficult' issues; as such, placing LGBT+ related matters into these parts of the curriculum could inadvertently reinforce the message that LGBT+ issues are controversial in themselves.

There is also an issue over the strength of teachers' subject knowledge in relation to LGBT+ matters. In Rowan Tree there was a specialist team because 'it's important that it's done right' (Mary), but this appears exceptional. In Fir Tree, all staff regardless of their subject were expected to teach various PSHE topics to their tutor groups. As Tom explained:

There is a set curriculum of stuff that we're required to go through and that includes a lot of inclusivity, diversity . . . each individual tutor will run sessions on equality across the board, on all the protected characteristics so, and we're given plenty of material to study and everything, in order for us to be able to confidently run that.

He admitted that staff had no training in teaching these materials and were expected to familiarise themselves with the subject, which seems the case in most schools.

## Discussion

Johnson and Amella's (2014) theoretical conceptualisation of isolation offers a means of understanding how the schools in this study contribute to LGBT+ students' sense of isolation. For example, student experiences of gendered spaces alone significantly contribute to students' senses of isolation, as a consequence of school policy and how such



policy is enacted. LGBT+ students report they are often victimised by peers within these spaces, which are often removed from teacher observation. This victimisation can occur in spaces which school policy compels students to use, effectively ignoring LGBT+ students' sexual orientation and/or gender identity, and it occurs in spaces which students have chosen to use because of how they identify. This raises serious questions about the decisions schools make about the use of spaces for LGBT+ students and how teachers monitor those spaces. At the moment, school and teacher (in)action simply reinforce any feeling of *being different*, which replicates findings elsewhere (e.g. Slater et al., 2018). Also, few schools have specific inclusivity-oriented policies on the use of gendered spaces, yet, where these exist, most staff are unaware of these policies. This means that students receive little social support from teachers, further compounding a sense of *social isolation*. This isolation is reinforced, particularly for trans and gender non-conforming students, by the actions and attitudes of some staff, and expectations around subjects such as physical education where there are separate sports for boys and girls.

The issue of isolation is further exacerbated by the extent to which students are out. Often students were out to their peers at school before their families, and therefore reluctant to report issues in school, as they feared their LGBT+ status would be communicated home. There is a clear sense students felt the need to *conceal their identity*, or at least limit the circle of people to whom they were out.

The existence of LGBT+ support groups in schools can provide social support and contact with LGBT+ peers, thereby tackling *social isolation* and providing some degree of *emotional* support. This is a view endorsed in other studies (e.g. Gower et al., 2018; Kosciw et al., 2013). However, the success of such groups seems to depend on the wider school culture. The potential stigma of joining such a group at some schools, i.e. Fir and Rowan Tree, meant some students felt the need to *conceal their identity* and avoid joining such groups. For other LGBT+ students, the support group was the only place they felt safe to be themselves – however, ideally, the whole school should be a safe space (Hope & Hall, 2018). Consequently, schools need to pay more attention to the overall school culture and work to ensure the school is inclusive as a whole, rather than feeling the creation of a support group is sufficient (Payne & Smith, 2012). Having a support group does not equate to having an affirming school environment. According to our data, support groups in most schools studied acted as a superficial fix, addressing some of the symptoms of a problem rather than the underlying causes. Dealing with the more deeply seeded issues requires what Airton (2018) refers to as 'extra effort' on behalf of the wider school population. The danger is that support groups, although providing contact with other LGBT+ youth and 'allies', can further isolate LGBT+ youth within the larger school community, potentially leading to victimisation outside of the group.

The lack of LGBT+ matters covered in the curriculum clearly seems to contribute to *cognitive isolation*, reinforcing a sense of othering (Formby, 2015). The issues around the curriculum are reminiscent of the debates around minority ethnic groups and their marginalisation through curriculum 'absence' (e.g. Wilkinson, 2014). The same case can be made for LGBT+ youth, whose experiences are rarely reflected in the curriculum. Although there is a move in England towards including LGBT+ issues in the new RSE guidelines (DfE, 2019), many students in this study experienced a largely heteronormative sex education. When LGBT+ issues were encountered these tended to be one-off

sessions, which is expressly counter to what the guidelines recommend (see p. 15). Although individual teachers mentioned how they looked to include LGBT+ examples in their teaching in the wider curriculum, this has largely gone unnoticed by the student focus group participants. This matters for three reasons. Firstly, those students who identify as LGBT+ are not learning about matters that directly affect them, and are therefore likely to remain ignorant of matters around safe sex and positive relationships. Secondly, they fail to encounter any relevant examples or role models in the curriculum relating to their sense of identity, which serves to emphasise their difference. Thirdly, non-LGBT+ students do not encounter LGBT+ examples in their studies and therefore are unlikely to see LGBT+ issues as a normal part of society. In both instances the impact is likely to heighten any sense of marginalisation of LGBT+ youth. As DePalma and Atkinson (2009) found in initial research stages with primary school teachers, even when explicit curricular inclusion policies existed, teachers lacked confidence and initiative to plan lessons that included LGBT-related content, which acts as a serious barrier to curriculum redesign.

Using Johnson and Amella's (2014) conceptualisation of isolation does appear to provide a valuable way to understand how schools contribute to LGBT+ students' sense of isolation. Many students reported feeling the need to *conceal their identity*, or at least limit to whom they are out. It can be argued that the way schools operate, regarding policy, curriculum integration and the knowledge, attitudes and beliefs of teachers, reinforces any notion of the self as *different*, fails to address issues around *identity concealment*, and creates a sense of *social* and *cognitive* isolation. Although the data revealed few explicit examples of *emotional isolation*, there was a sense from the focus groups that students did find their school experience at times deeply frustrating and unsafe.

Taking these points collectively, the schools studied do unfortunately seem to contribute to the isolation that many LGBT+ youngsters experience. It is concerning that data show that schools seem to reinforce different forms of isolation, e.g. social, cognitive and identity concealment. Overall, there was a clear sense that LGBT+ students felt they had been 'othered' within the school community. This is largely the result of the prevailing heteronormative and cisgendered school cultures. For example, most of the students at Fir Tree and Ash Tree were too scared to be 'out' in school. Students across all the schools variously described themselves as 'misfits', 'weirdos', 'dunces' and 'feeling different' and in many places the LGBT+ support group was nicknamed the 'gay gang'. As one student at Yew Tree said, 'I just want to feel like I'm part of everyone else.' It also has to be recognised that this study engaged with students who were, to varying degrees, willing to be out; many of the students knew of others who did not participate in the study who were reluctant to be out, and obviously there will be others who are completely closeted and potentially experiencing a more extreme sense of isolation (see Higa et al., 2014).

## Conclusion

Although some studies (e.g. McCormack & Anderson, 2010; Morris et al., 2014; White et al., 2018) report an improving picture for LGBT+ students, this study highlights that there is considerably more work that many schools need to undertake. Numerous studies

have highlighted the challenges facing LGBT+ youngsters; in particular, the negative mental health issues many students have been well documented (e.g. Murray, 2011). It is equally clear that where schools have taken steps to address concerns, these can be beneficial to a degree (e.g. Kosciw et al., 2013).

Yet, essentially, any meaningful change requires a focus on the school culture and a critiquing of heteronormative and cisgendered norms (see Payne & Smith, 2013; Rawlings, 2019). Without a thorough and careful understanding of how to normalise being LGBT+ and ensuring this becomes part of the culture of the institution, other interventions (although helpful) are unlikely to make a significant difference to the experiences of young people who identify as LGBT+.

However, focusing on isolation, in its different forms, potentially allows schools to take a more systematic approach in supporting LGBT+ students and appreciate how the general school culture and climate can (unwittingly) have a negative impact on these students. For example, making changes to the curriculum to make it more inclusive of LGBT+ matters can address concerns around *cognitive isolation*, and having clearer guidance on the use of gendered spaces for LGBT+ youngsters could counter issues around *social isolation*. Given the challenges facing young people who identify as LGBT+, the issues highlighted in this article require further intervention and investigation, if schools are going to become the inclusive environment that these students need.

## Notes

1. A single interview was carried out at Oak Tree instead of a focus group due to staff absence on the day, as students were unaware of where and when the meeting was happening. As data were collected towards the end of the academic year, an alternative date for a focus group was not possible. One of the researchers was, however, already familiar with a number of the students and issues in the school, having worked with them on a previous project.
2. This focus group was larger than expected. Schools were asked to arrange a group of up to eight students, but in this case all the students in the school support group wished to attend, and the school had made special arrangements to facilitate this.
3. In total 153 staff responses were analysed from across the six schools (out of an estimated 450 staff: see also Harris, Wilson-Daily, & Fuller, 2021). Of the responses, 69% were from teaching staff; the rest were other staff.

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## Appendix A

### Indicative questions for focus group

Start with introductions for the voice recorder – thank everyone – explain purpose is to examine their experience in school (and how this relates to what school policies say and what teachers say) – we may discuss some things with which they may feel uncomfortable but they do not have to

respond if they prefer and reassure that anything said here will be made unattributable (the school may ask for a summary of key points to inform their next steps) – aim is to work with schools and local LGBT+ organisations to provide further training for schools and to write a possible article and to apply for money to conduct a larger study.

- How do you self-identify? Are you out at school and home? How long have you been out?
- Do you feel safe/accepted/included at school?
- Prompts – are you aware of any school policies about supporting LGBT+ students/does the school openly promote LGBT+ issues?
- Prompts – have you had any issues from other students/teachers for being LGBT+?
- Prompts – do you feel the curriculum meets your needs/reflects who you are?
- Prompts – do you feel able to talk to teachers about LGBT+ issues/who would you talk to?
- Give examples for all
- What does the school do to support you?
- Does it work?
- Is it enough?
- What more could the school do to help/support you?
- What could/would you do if you felt unhappy about something – e.g. use of inappropriate language directed at you for being LGBT+/lack of teacher sensitivity/awareness of LGBT+ issues/concerns about your mental health/well-being?
- Do you think the school is equally supportive of trans issues as well as LGB issues?
- Is there anything else you would like to add? Are you happy with the questions asked – should I change anything for the other schools I will be visiting?