

The experience of LGBT+ people in Ireland has changed significantly in the last decade. This article examines how LGBT+ staff, pupils, and families currently experience Irish primary schools, and the implications of this for future decisions by educators, school leaders, academics, policymakers, and other stakeholders.

## Introduction

The experience of LGBT+ people in Ireland has changed significantly in the last decade. The introduction of same-sex civil partnership in 2011, followed by the successful referendum on same-sex marriage in May 2015, gave a legal basis to same-sex relationships for the first time. The passing of the Gender Recognition Act in July 2015 allowed transgender people over the age of 18 to self-declare their own gender identity. The Act, however, made no provision for intersex people, non-binary people, or those under 16. Similarly, the Children and Family Relationships Act, enacted in May 2020, gave legal protection to some LGBT+ families, but major gaps still exist.

From an education perspective, the amendment to Section 37.1 of the Employment Equality Act of 1998 via the Equality (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act in December 2015 marked a significant advance in protections for LGBT+ teachers in religious-run schools, and the inclusion of homophobic and transphobic bullying in the Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools, issued by the Department of Education and Skills in 2013, marked a commitment to improving the experiences of LGBT+ pupils in Irish schools.

This article will explore how LGBT+ staff, pupils, and families currently experience Irish primary schools, and the implications of this for future decisions by educators, school leaders, academics, policymakers, and other stakeholders.

## Diversity in the LGBT+ community

The LGBT+ community is often presented as a unified entity, but it consists of diverse individuals with many disparate experiences. Aside from the sexual and gender identities represented directly in the initialism (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender), it also includes people who are queer, intersex, asexual, pansexual, non-binary, and gender-fluid, among others.

# Being LGBT+ in Irish Primary Schools

Sunshine and  
rainbows, or storm  
clouds ahead?



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These identities can also intersect: a person can be both intersex and transgender, or both non-binary and pansexual, for example. Being LGBT+ can also intersect with other identities, such as ethnicity, religion, neurodiversity, membership of the Travelling or Roma community, or socioeconomic class. There is no single ‘LGBT+ experience’.

Research in this area has increased in recent years, but not all experiences in the community have been captured equally: (white) gay and lesbian experiences are the most prominent, especially from a school staff perspective. Significant omissions include the experiences of intersex, asexual, and non-binary people. Research on LGBT+ experiences of primary pupils is almost completely absent. But the research that is available can give some insight into what it is like to be LGBT+ in our schools, and can signal actions that are necessary to make our schools more inclusive.

### LGBT+ staff

With the developments mentioned above, one could be forgiven for thinking that ‘all has been solved’ for LGBT+ school staff. Egan and McDaid (2019), however, found that despite positive experiences of recognition in schools around the time of the marriage equality referendum, this progress was fragile and it dissipated once the referendum had passed. Similarly, Neary (2020) highlighted how legislative change can often prove ineffective at tackling the complexities of injustice and deeply ingrained heteronormativity in school environments.<sup>1</sup>

**“ Research carried out by the INTO Equality Committee found that only 18% of LGBT+ teachers were fully ‘out’ in their schools and that 40% were not out at all (INTO, 2020). ”**

Research carried out by the INTO Equality Committee found that only 18% of LGBT+ teachers were fully ‘out’ in their schools (i.e., to staff, parents or guardians, and pupils) and that 40% were not out at all (INTO, 2020). For some, being openly LGBT+ was not regarded as a difficulty, but others – especially in schools with religious patronage – expressed concern about the reaction of their boards of management and of parents. This is significant, given that 94.2% of primary schools in Ireland are under religious patronage (Department of Education, 2020).

The national LGBTIreland study found that only 75% of respondents would feel comfortable with their child’s teacher being lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Higgins et al., 2016). This figure dropped to 63% if the teacher was transgender. This may contribute to the uncertainty that some LGBT+ staff feel about being out in their school community.

### Action Points

- School management need to ensure proactive, inclusive messaging to create safe spaces for LGBT+ staff; 80% of teachers saw the principal as essential in this process (INTO, 2020). LGBT+ teachers indicated that seeing LGBT+-inclusive resources on display in the environment provided a significant level of comfort that their identity was accepted.
- Strong LGBT+-inclusive statements from religious patron bodies would significantly reduce the uncertainty felt by LGBT+ staff in these schools.

- Educational stakeholders, including the Department of Education, the Teaching Council, and training providers, should conduct an LGBT+-inclusive audit of their systems: Can non-binary teachers choose an honorific that matches their identity on online forms or registration, and so on.
- Further research is needed to accurately capture the voices of those absent from current research, especially intersex, asexual, transgender, and non-binary staff, and LGBT+ people who discounted teaching as a career due to their experiences in school.

### LGBT+ pupils and families

Research is scarce on the experiences of LGBT+ pupils or of pupils in LGBT+-headed families in Irish primary schools. At second level, schools are often not positive environments for LGBT+ youth. The School Climate Survey found that 73% of LGBT+ students feel unsafe at school, and almost half (48%) had heard homophobic remarks from school staff (Pizmony-Levy & BeLonG To, 2019).

At primary level, the INTO survey (2020) showed that only 11% of teachers had books with LGBT+ characters in their classrooms, and only 14% had explored LGBT+ identities with their class. One third (33%) of teachers said they felt inhibited by their school patronage or management, and 5% had been explicitly told not to include LGBT+ issues in their teaching. LGBT+ families have also been found to be absent from class textbooks (Moloney & O'Toole, 2018).

The cisheteronormativity<sup>2</sup> of the classroom is exemplified by the fact that discussions of LGBT+ relationships are considered by some as 'inappropriate' for young children, while fairytales with opposite-sex relationships are commonplace. Neary and Cross (2018) found that school communities were often comfortable dealing with transphobic bullying but much more uncertain educating about gender identity. They found that any progressive change with regard to trans inclusion in schools was highly individualised and did not result in questioning the institutional workings of gender norms that are restrictive for all children.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) has led to the development of materials for a Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)/RSE toolkit (NCCA, 2021). This includes some LGBT+-inclusive resources and references to LGBT+-inclusive practice in the guidance documents. Time will tell whether these have a meaningful impact on the lived experience of LGBT+ pupils in our schools.

#### Action Points

- Schools should have openly LGBT+-supportive educators, ensure they are teaching an LGBT+-inclusive curriculum, institute LGBT+-inclusive policies, and consistently challenge homophobic remarks. This has been shown to create a safer and more inclusive school climate (Pizmony-Levy & BeLonG To, 2019; Kosciw et al., 2020).

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- Teachers should proactively include positive messaging about being LGBT+. This makes all pupils feel safer in school, whether or not they are LGBT+ (Milsom, 2021).
- Any new curriculum must include explicit LGBT+-inclusive objectives. The current curriculum has lots of opportunities for teachers to include positive LGBT+ messaging – for example, including same-sex families in SPHE; reading books with LGBT+ characters; studying LGBT+-related history; learning about the LGBT+ identity of famous people in history, writers, artists, scientists, musicians, and so on. Teachers are often reluctant to do so because it is not explicit in the objectives.

## Conclusion

Much progress has undoubtedly been achieved for LGBT+ people in Ireland in recent times. However, this does not automatically translate into better experiences at school for LGBT+ staff, pupils, and families without thoughtful and targeted action from decision-makers in the field.

Given the impending introduction of a new curriculum and the attendant transformation of learning in our primary schools, we have a timely opportunity to interrogate the cisheteronormativity that has hitherto dominated our classrooms and to create a better, more inclusive system for the generations to come.

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## ENDNOTES

1. Heteronormativity is the belief that heterosexuality is the only normal and natural expression of sexuality, or the assumption that all people encountered are heterosexual.
2. Cisheteronormativity, mentioned later in the article, extends this idea to encompass gender identity. Cisgender is where one's gender identity corresponds with the sex that one was assigned at birth; transgender is where it doesn't. Cisnormativity, then, is the belief that being cisgender is the only normal and natural form of gender identity, or the assumption that all people encountered are cisgender. Cisheteronormativity refers to the assumption that people encountered are both heterosexual and cisgender.

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### **Loneliness - a key public health challenge**

The Covid-19 pandemic has shown the need for a public health approach to tackle loneliness and social isolation.

This was the message from experts attending an all-island webinar focused on the impact of COVID-19 on loneliness organised by the Institute of Public Health in February 2021.

Over 1,000 people involved in public health, community services and research on the island of Ireland – North and South – joined in the event.

Prof Roger O'Sullivan, Institute of Public Health, said that taking a public health approach could help tackle the root causes of loneliness.

"Our understanding and approach to loneliness is often stereotypical. The reality is that some people with lots of friends can still feel lonely and those who live alone may not.

"Early evidence shows that younger people are disproportionately impacted by loneliness during the pandemic. "Although loneliness is a very personal experience, addressing loneliness is not simply a matter for individuals but is also an issue for public health and society as a whole.

"During this pandemic, a lot more people have gained personal insight into what it means to be lonely. There is now a real opportunity to build on the greater understanding, empathy and concern that have been shown towards those experiencing loneliness and to put in place policies and structures to tackle the root causes and to help support healthy choices.

"We need to take loneliness seriously and recognise it impacts on both physical and mental health," Prof O'Sullivan said.

Some steps that may help:

- Connect with others - spend time building and developing your connections, reach out.
- Be active –walk, cycle, garden –find something you enjoy and that works for you.
- Take notice – take notice of how you are feeling and your environment - when you feel lonely - listen and take action.
- Keep learning - try something new: learn a language, learn to paint, learn to dance.
- Give - do something nice for others e.g. volunteer - it may help you and may help others more.