

What does Covid-19 mean for LGBT+ students and teachers?

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In the last ten days, I have heard that two young people in my area have committed suicide in their childhood bedrooms. Both identified as trans, and one was supposed to do their A-levels this year before heading off to university.

In common with all communities, Covid-19 is having a profound effect on LGBT+ people, forcing us into ways of living, behaving and interacting that would have been unimaginable just a few months ago. However, some of our challenges differ considerably from those of our heterosexual and cis-gendered peers.

Family and the home has never seemed so important. Night after night the news brings us depictions of the ways in which families are coming together to support elderly relatives and to home-school children. These narratives are exclusively heteronormative and make unhelpful assumptions that behind closed doors our lives are all the same.

Over the last few years schools have made enormous strides to challenge heteronormativity for students, staff and families. I am fortunate enough to work with LGBT+ teachers as part of a leadership programme called [Courageous Leaders](#) and I have been encouraged to hear about the way in which staff support LGBT+ young people, through the development of School Pride Clubs, through the depictions of LGBT+ people in the curriculum and via celebrations such as Pride Month and LGBT History Month. A few of the teachers I've spoken to recently are however worried that those young people are now at home with their parents (who they may or may not be out to, who may or may not be supportive of their identity) without access to any support.

Those LGBT+ young people who gained so much from their inclusive school communities are, as a result of Covid-19, now at home in their bedrooms, possibly back in the closet and cut off from the pastoral support their schools provided for them. The Albert Kennedy Trust (AKT), a charity supporting young people LGBT+ young people aged 16-25 advised young people to think hard before coming out while self-isolating with their families. Tim Sigsworth, AKT CEO, said "If you're a young person and you're thinking of coming out, press pause on that until you get support". LGBT+ people make up around 25 per cent of the UK's homeless population with family rejection the main reason for living on the streets.

The Covid-19 pandemic has also changed life for our LGBT+ teachers. As the majority, for now work from home, and deliver online learning, an inevitable blurring of the personal and professional identities has taken place as students see inside the homes of their teachers for the first time. My research showed that LGBT+ teachers are very cautious when talking

about their home lives in the school workplace (Lee, 2019a). Some LGBT+ teachers are talking with their line managers for the first time about who they live with and what their caring responsibilities are. It has forced some LGBT+ teachers to come out at work for the first time.

As house prices have forced early career teachers to be serial renters or to remain at home in their childhood bedrooms, they may be sharing their days in small spaces with family members or even living in flat-shares with relative strangers. The closing of pubs, clubs and restaurants has meant many LGBT+ teachers no longer have the social networks on which they often rely. Some LGBT+ teachers may be living alone. The Section 28 era meant that very few older LGBT+ teachers have children of their own and so may lack the family support provided by adult children during lockdown.

Although there is no doubt that Covid-19 presents particular challenges for LGBT+ teachers and students, this is not entirely negative. The LGBT+ community has a history of creating families of choice (Mitchell, 2008), friends who serve the function of families when LGBT+ people are estranged from their biological families. Teachers are no exception. During lockdown, my LGBT+ teacher friends and I (my family of choice for the last 25 years), have shopped for one another and quizzed via Zoom every week. There is no doubt that the silver lining in this strangest of times is the online social groups have emerged and begun to thrive. Diva, the lesbian Lifestyle Magazine, has a vibrant closed Facebook community providing a much needed social space for the lesbian community. The growth of online socialising means that LGBT+ students and teachers alike may have found new ways to connect with the LGBT+ community or may be participating in the community for the very first time.

We must not underestimate however, the extent to which the Covid-19 era is testing the emotional and mental health of all members of our society, and that includes LGBT+ teachers and their students. In 2019, I surveyed LGBT+ teachers across the UK and found that 64% of them had accessed help for anxiety or depression linked to their sexual or gender identity and role as a teacher (Lee, 2019b). Ruby Wax, the comedian and mental health advocate forecast in a recent interview that the UK would experience a 'mental health tsunami' post Covid-19 lockdown. When lockdown is lifted and schools return, we must invest properly in our mental health support services. The two young trans people who took their own lives are hidden statistics in the Covid-19 death rate data. Schools have a vital role to play in putting their communities back together by providing the safe and inclusive spaces that many desperately miss at this challenging time.

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