

Case Study: LGBT Inclusion in a Primary School

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Background

Boothroyd Primary Academy is a large Primary school serving an area of high deprivation. The community itself is very diverse although the majority of pupils follow a Muslim faith and the majority of the remaining pupils are of Eastern European descent.

It was during our work towards the Mental Health in Schools Award at Leeds Beckett University that we realised, as a school, that we had a real gap in our teaching about LGBT identities and diversity. An inspirational workshop with Claire Birkenshaw, lecturer at Leeds Beckett University, was the pivotal moment in our decision that we had a duty to include diversity in our curriculum. Both myself and my Chair of Governors attended the conference and we felt strongly that we should be teaching children about ALL of the nine protected characteristics within the Equality Act 2010 and not just those we may find 'easier'. We decided to adopt the LGBTQ+ framework that Leeds Beckett University had developed.

Why is it so important?

- 1) Inclusion by its very nature should mean that EVERYONE is included
- 2) Children have a right to feel accepted and to belong to their school community regardless of race, religion, family background etc – to be accepted they have to feel they are RECOGNISED and REPRESENTED
- 3) Currently some schools are ignoring a part of our community in what we are teaching and representing to children and are reinforcing a concept of 'normal' that does not exist

The process

We started with a commitment from our governing body to work towards an inclusive education relating to all aspects of the Equality Act and wanted to launch this to the whole school. It was really important to identify potential barriers prior to starting this and we spent a good deal of time working together with parents, staff and advisors to do this and to create a potential barrier audit and our steps to address them.

The first step was to engage staff and educate them so that they felt able to deal with questions and felt empowered to teach the pupils. For many staff, the workshop delivered by

Claire was the first time they had been introduced to some of the issues faced by the LGBT community and certainly the first time for many that they felt empathy and a recognition of their duty to do something about it through educating children. Staff of all faiths and races attended the training and all staff felt better equipped to move forward with our diversity focus. I am proud to say that all staff, regardless of their religion, were genuinely moved by some of the stories Claire shared and there was a real commitment from everyone to teach acceptance. I think the fact that we chose to train staff using 'real life' experiences rather than a workshop approach is one of the reasons we were so successful in gaining the buy-in of staff so quickly.

We had an amazing opportunity to showcase our art work at the local Town Hall and decided this was a great platform on which to launch our work. The whole school produced art work and poetry around the theme of diversity using photographs and children's books to inspire children and to stimulate discussion- the work produced was simple amazing! Children never fail to surprise adults in their complete acceptance of others, their understanding of differences and why this is special. The showcase was a great springboard for the school as there was media interest, messages on Twitter etc and it remained on show for over 4 weeks.

The diversity showcase was the start of our transformation of our learning environment as well. We felt that we needed to create an inclusive environment- one where it was obvious we were a totally inclusive school. Staff were invited to change their lanyards to rainbow ones and to add a diversity flag to their email signatures. We added a sign in page to our reception area stating that we were an inclusive school and expected visitors to uphold this culture and we added diversity themed displays around our whole school environment.

However, if you want diversity to be present in all aspects of the curriculum it needs a different approach and a 'themed week' or assembly message once in a while isn't enough for it to be truly embedded in teaching.

We have introduced policies and updated others to include transphobia, homophobia and biphobia for example and we have ensured that all recruitment information details our commitment to inclusion including inserting statements in our Home-School agreement. Decisions such as taking gender out of our uniform policy and introducing preferred pronouns onto staff badges are small steps but go a long way in terms of creating a culture of inclusivity.

We have had challenges and questions along the way but if you really believe that this is a fundamental right for children, as we do at Boothroyd, then questions are easy to answer and it is easier to stand firm. We have tackled issues from parents along the way and always

had an open door policy- issues have been addressed quickly and face to face but we have made it clear that relationships education and the inclusion of LGBT is part of our curriculum. Whilst we have been willing to listen to concerns, we have not changed this view nor legally should we. We have shared resources with parents, so they feel informed about what their children are learning and the majority have been supportive.

We have also made sure that we have an ongoing conversation with parents- a one off workshop is not enough to allay fears and misinterpretation especially when issues are raised in the press and social media. At Boothroyd we have had numerous workshops and continually listen to what the parents need us to do to make them feel comfortable with what we are teaching their children. For example, a recent discussion with parents identified a need to invite parents into some of our diversity lessons so that they understand how we use picture books etc to stimulate discussion. This had stemmed from recent social media scaremongering about the texts that they said schools were using.

Common questions and our approach

1. Why is there so much focus on diversity at the moment- more than other areas of the curriculum?

Firstly, it is simply because we have shied away from teaching anything to our children about some aspects of equality previously, so the gap is much wider. Think about years ago when most of the resources in our schools showed white families – as our communities have changed so have our educational resources and content and we had a lot of educating about different races for example to fill a gap that was identified- this is the same. Once diversity becomes an integral part of our curriculum, we won't need this 'push'. Secondly, we can't ignore our moral obligation as leaders- our eyes have been opened to the fact inequality exists and to the poor representation of some parts of our community in education and we cannot ignore that anymore- nor should we when we are leading the education of a next generation.

2. How have we interpreted the government advice that school should teach in an age appropriate fashion?

We have used common sense judgement and the simple advice from Stonewall- if it is age appropriate for teachers to refer to mummy and daddy, it is therefore age appropriate for teachers to refer to daddy and daddy and mummy and mummy. Children in Key Stage 2 use the correct terminology and understand terms such as gay, homosexual, lesbian and homophobia for example just as we use the correct terminology for other subjects.

3. Why not leave teaching about LGBT until children are in high school?

There are children in primary school who belong to different family units and all children should feel represented- they shouldn't have to wait for high school to feel normal. We also know that there are children in primary school who identify as LGBT and we need to ensure that they feel safe, secure and part of their communities.

Final words

We recently had a visit from OFSTED who commented that equality and diversity were like ivy running through everything we did- we couldn't have asked for a better comment. True equality education should be seamless and should be present in everything we do without the need for standalone weeks or events.

Why should we teach children ?- because it is our role as educator to help our children grow into respectful citizens.