

# IT'S MORE THAN FLAGS AND RAINBOWS



Getting LGBTQ+ provision right in schools

Ian Timbrell

## **Praise for *It's More Than Flags and Rainbows***

A positive and purposeful book with the occasional dollop of humour added throughout. Almost every sentence and paragraph needs highlighting for its ideas, provocation, or information. Ian's experience of growing up with homophobic bullying, and finding the courage it takes to come out, brings home the absolute need for every school to address LGBT+ identities as a core part of their approach to diversity, equality, inclusion, and belonging.

I wish had been given this book as a core text at the start of teaching. It would have been simultaneously enlightening and affirming of my values and passions within education. Furthermore, the explanations of terminology and the considered reasons for doing or not doing particular actions are very clear.

This is a brilliant book! I found it easy to read. A useful way to foster inclusion at any school or organisation that values all children and young people, outside or in.

**Juliet Robertson, education consultant and author of  
*Blood Lines, Dirty Teaching, and Messy Maths***

This book will be enormously helpful to those responsible for schools, whether as governor, school leader, or with local authority or MAT responsibilities. The issues around gender and identity are some of the most complex challenges facing schools today. Those issues are dealt with in a clear and measured analysis of every aspect. Ian Timbrell offers a coherent approach with guidelines for decisions and advice on best ways forward, all with sensitivity and always in the best interests of young people.

**Mick Waters, educationalist and author**

Ian has written a book that clearly comes from both his personal and political awareness. As a gay teacher who, like so many before him, had a torrid time at school – experiencing no positive mention of homosexuality and suffering bouts of homophobic bullying – he writes with passion and knowledge in the hope of making sure that another generation does not have to suffer as he did.

It is a very well-constructed how-to book for educators and anyone who is working in an organisation, taking the reader through clear steps that are not only LGBTQ+ friendly but explore and enable inclusivity.

The book is timely given the challenges we now face with the right wing particularly in America but also here in the UK, challenging the human rights of trans people. The book takes the reader on a journey to discover the myriad of reasons why the work is necessary, the footnotes and resources alone are compelling. The discussion of emotional suffering and scarring leading to unfulfilled potential makes clear to the uninitiated the crucialness of the work.

Ian uses a compassionate tone, indicating that we all need to learn – that knowing how defamatory language, lack of representation and silence has a negative effect, not only on young people who know they are LGBT+ or who are beginning to think they might be, but on everyone. Ignorance leads to prejudice, and it is every teacher and employer's job to make sure that every student and staff member is safe and in a position where they can be seen as who they are.

*It's More Than Flags and Rainbows* is a clever title, indicating as it does that superficial signalling is not sufficient. Ian takes care to guide us through small steps that have a fair chance of success. Then leads us on slowly to deeper changes that will affect the school or organisational culture and its curriculum or policies.

Throughout he offers examples of resources and reminds us to take care of ourselves and find named allies to support us. So check out the footnotes and the resources at the back and you will have a companion and guide to the crucial work of ensuring that your organisation recognises and celebrates each and every person in it.

**Sue Sanders, she/her, professor emeritus, CEO of Schools OUT,  
co-founder of UK LGBTQ+ History Month**

*It's More Than Flags and Rainbows* offers practical and actionable insights for education professionals interested in LGBTQ+ diversity and inclusion. It explores key themes with nuance and does not shy away from the more difficult conversations that need to be had in order to create meaningful inclusion beyond flags and rainbows. Ian shares his lived experience as a gay man, his practical

knowledge as a former teacher, and his expertise as an LGBTQ+ diversity and inclusion consultant to create a thought-provoking guide for educators. This book is a great and timely addition to the field of LGBTQ+ inclusive education!

**Jo Brassington and Dr Adam Brett, founders and hosts of Pride & Progress**

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# Introduction

.....

‘It’s wacky! It’s fun! It’s cr-a-a-a-zy! It’s outrageous! Fun House, it’s a whole lot of fun ...’

If you can finish that line, then you are probably around my age (and if you aren’t, I urge you to check it out on YouTube). This is from the gameshow *Fun House* with the incomparable Pat Sharp. In typical 1980s and 1990s kids TV show fashion, there was complete chaos jammed into a 30-minute show. From searching around the house for tags and labels to finishing with a go-kart race, it was a cultural phenomenon. But the show (however amazing) is not the point here.

Ten-year-old me had the biggest celebrity crush on the presenter Pat Sharp and his long golden mullet. All I wanted to do was brush his hair and drive around in a go-kart together (what dreams!). But why didn’t anyone else talk about him in this way? Why were they all fixated on the leotard-clad blonde twins? Sure, they were pretty, but not compared to my Pat.

It didn’t matter to me at the time, and I don’t remember being bothered by feeling different to other people. But the lack of conversation around what I was experiencing, and an absence of certain words from the school vocabulary, meant that I was oblivious as to why I was feeling that way. As I got older, I just assumed that it was something that would eventually go away.

I loved primary school, which I remember as a happy, energetic, and supportive environment. But unbeknownst to us at the time, this support was selective and didn’t actually include everyone. There were large proportions of our population missing from the curriculum. Where were the people who felt like I did? Although I didn’t know it, these people existed. But where were they?

The end of Year 6 came, and I began a new adventure in secondary school. And that is where everything changed. I was introduced to a new word: gay. But this wasn’t through conversation or education; it was through bullying. These school

experiences set me on course for where I am today. A life of highs and lows but, most of all, an exploration of identity and acceptance that is still going on 30 years later.

.....

## **Why More Than Flags and Rainbows?**

Get your flags and rainbows ready, give everyone rainbow lanyards, hold a Pride event, and BANG you have an inclusive school. Right?

This is what we see in many areas of society, especially around Pride Month. Businesses change their logos to rainbow versions, shop windows suddenly become 'rainbowfied', and there is a lot of rainbow merchandise for sale in stores. But this is not just businesses; schools are guilty of it too. Whether we are talking about a few assemblies in LGBT+ History Month, a solitary lesson in Black History Month, or buying some inclusive books and putting them in a box in the library, many people try to improve inclusivity from good intentions. Although it should not be the motivation behind these actions, schools sometimes feel they must do these things or do them because it makes them look good. This is what we would call virtue signalling and, unfortunately, it is very prevalent in education and society (do not get me started on social media). This is what I want to help you to avoid. Instead, what I want you to achieve is the beginning of long-term and meaningful change for a genuine purpose. I want to help you plan an approach which will help every child to feel safe, seen, and supported.

I am not saying you should not wear rainbow lanyards or do one-off lessons or assemblies, but these activities are going to have limited impact in the long term without wider cultural and curriculum change. If lessons or assemblies are isolated and not combined with a comprehensively inclusive curriculum, there is a risk that minorities are viewed as separate to the rest of society, as something other-than, or (and I hate to say the word) as not normal. We need to carefully consider how we build a curriculum where the diversity of our world is recognised, and diverse groups are viewed as integrated rather than separate entities within communities.

Celebrating and discussing differences are important, but so too are identifying our similarities and the values and attitudes that we share in common.

You might have already guessed why I named this book *It's More Than Flags and Rainbows*, but it does not come from an imaginary place. After visiting a school covered in rainbow flags and lanyards, but where the pupils felt unsafe and unrepresented, I had a conversation with the wonderful Ian Gilbert (author of *The Little Book of Thunks* and many more<sup>1</sup>) about diversity education in schools. This led to a discussion about how to create an approach where we avoid virtue signalling and instead develop real and meaningful change. I would like to think that no one sets out to tick a diversity box, but sometimes people do not know where to start and so go for the obvious visual symbols. And if that is you, I would just like to say that you should not feel guilty about it; these visual symbols and one-off events are important. But in this book we will be delving much deeper and combining these visual and individual events with more comprehensive approaches to create lasting change.

Although the focus of this book will be on LGBTQ+ diversity and inclusion, we will also be exploring wider diversity. No one group is more important than any other, and while specific discussion points and considerations are needed for LGBTQ+ pupils, many of the principles in this book are applicable to most areas of diversity.

## How to use this book

So, who are you, and is this book right for you? Whether you are a head teacher, teacher, pastoral lead, or simply someone passionate about LGBTQ+ inclusion and diversity in schools, I have written this book with you in mind. It offers practical, actionable insights for all the education community, acknowledging that how you apply these steps may differ depending on your role. You may rely on support from various colleagues or departments but, ultimately, this book will equip you to help foster a more inclusive and supportive school environment.

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<sup>1</sup> I. Gilbert, *The Little Book of Thunks: 260 Questions to Make Your Brain Go Ouch!* (Carmarthen: Crown House Publishing, 2007).

At the beginning of every chapter is a vignette from my life story. I decided to include these as they not only provide context about how I arrived at my ideas, but they also demonstrate how many of the issues I am trying to tackle in this book appear in real life. Some of these episodes are difficult for me to talk about, but in a strange way, it was quite cathartic to write them down. I thank you for reading my story and getting to know me a bit better; it is a privilege to be able to share these events with you.

When writing this book, I wanted to describe a journey through improving the diversity and inclusion of a school because some people might not know where to start. You may decide to read this book from beginning to end or you might dip in and out. There is no one-size-fits-all approach. You must do what works for you and your school community. Whether that is taking individual chapters and adapting them to your setting or moving through the chapters incrementally, I hope you find the book useful and that it enhances your level of knowledge and confidence in improving diversity and inclusion.

First, we all need to have a common understanding of the words we will be using. In Chapter 1, you will learn the meaning behind LGBTQ+ concepts and terminology. I will pick apart some of the more complex issues, such as the word 'queer', and consider what exactly people are saying about transgender identities in schools. With this information, you will be far better equipped to discuss LGBTQ+ inclusion with your pupils and staff and ensure that the education you are delivering is accurate. You might already be wondering why I am using LGBTQ+ and not one of the plethora of other initialisms; do not panic, this will also be covered in Chapter 1.

In Chapters 2 and 3, you will explore where you are as a school community and how to create an action plan based on your findings. It can be very tempting to skip this step and go straight to doing (brace yourself for my favourite phrase) 'things and stuff', but this often results in surface-level changes or virtue signalling. I want to make sure you plan for long-term and sustainable change.

In the rest of the book, you will discover many ideas for the next steps that you and your school community can take. You may decide to read all these chapters before starting or just refer to the ones that are included in your action plan.

But before we begin, we need to explore why this work is necessary.

# Why the DEIB?

I find it remarkable that in education, we have to justify our decision to improve diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB). I am sure you would agree that most educators come into teaching for more than just a job; they do so to make a difference. This might sound trite, but it is true; I do not think many people enter teaching because of the money or hours. So, it should be no surprise that teachers want to do the best for their pupils, especially those who are facing discrimination, or prejudice, or experiencing additional challenges in their lives.

We are in a challenging time for DEIB, where decisions made by schools are increasingly questioned on social media, in the media, and even in person, particularly regarding LGBTQ+ work. Accusations of age-inappropriate teaching, indoctrination, and grooming are prevalent on certain platforms, but these concerns are usually voiced by a minority only. It is easy for people to be misled by online echo chambers, but these views do not reflect the broader reality of what the wider population think or believe. The harsh comments online are often the work of keyboard warriors, and they rarely have a significant impact in real life. In the schools where I have worked, I have found overwhelmingly supportive communities. When challenges have arisen from individual families, they are typically rooted in misinformation or a lack of transparency from the school. In contrast to what some people would have you believe on social media, when you engage with your school community directly, rather than against it, any pushback you encounter will typically be limited to a small number of individuals.

I do not want to suggest that everything will always go smoothly and there will never be any challenges. You may very well receive criticism, pushback, or worse, and while this is mentally and emotionally demanding, I hope you have a team around you that can provide the support you need to continue the mission that you know is right. We will explore working with parents and the community in Chapter 8 to hopefully help you avoid these difficulties,

but I will also give you some tools and strategies should there be disagreement or conflict between home and school.

Throughout this book, you will hear my own personal reasons for wanting to improve diversity and inclusion. However, my desire to improve the world is also rooted in the experiences of many others. There is plenty of evidence for why we should improve diversity and inclusion, which can generally be grouped into two areas: legal and moral.

## The legal bit

The Equality Act 2010 brought together over 100 pieces of legislation to improve equity and reduce inequality in the UK. In the Act, there are nine protected characteristics: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation.<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that gender is not a protected characteristic in the UK. I will discuss sex and gender, and what this distinction means, in Chapter 1.

This book focuses on LGBTQ+ inclusion from a UK perspective, but it is relevant to other countries as well. Although the United States lacks a federal law mandating as many aspects of equality as the UK, several states have their own protections in place. In the United States, there have been attempts to create legislation which grants protections to LGBTQ+ people, particularly in the workplace, such as H.R.5.<sup>3</sup> However, these protections have not yet become law. In Australia, LGBTQ+ individuals are generally protected under the Sex Discrimination Act 1984, which includes gender as a protected characteristic in addition to sex.<sup>4</sup> While equality legislation varies across countries, this book addresses universal principles that can be adapted to different legal contexts.

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/section/4>.

<sup>3</sup> See Congress.gov, H.R.5 – 116th Congress (2019–2020): Equality Act (20 May 2019). Available at: <https://www.congress.gov/116/bills/hr5/BILLS-116hr5rfs.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.legislation.gov.au/C2004A02868/latest/text>.



## The moral bit

As you go through this book, you will be introduced to my story and what I went through in school and afterwards. But this is about more than me. This is about making every child, young person, and adult in our schools and our communities feel safe, seen, and supported.

The words *safe*, *seen*, and *supported* are commonly used to describe how to protect young people and children from harm and abuse. If young people have to hide who they are, or are made to feel less than 'normal', or are bullied for their identity, or do not get the education they need, they are not safe. If people do not see or learn about other people who are different to them, they will inevitably develop misconceptions or even prejudices. Coming out can be challenging for young people and their families, and if they are not supported, this can lead to isolation and mental-health challenges.

The statistics in this section may be difficult to read, but everyone involved should understand that DEIB work is about the mental health and well-being of young people. It is also important to recognise that when school ends, people's educational experiences continue to impact their work and personal life. This means that, although this book is focused on education, your work in schools will help to shape the adult citizens of tomorrow.

The following information comes from several sources:

- + *Positive Futures: How Supporting LGBT+ Young People Enables Them to Thrive in Adulthood*, a report by the charity Just Like Us, which surveyed the experiences of 3,695 18- to 25-year-olds from across the UK in 2023.<sup>5</sup>
- + *Growing up LGBT+: The Impact of School, Home and Coronavirus on LGBT+ Young People*, another report by Just

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5 Just Like Us, *Positive Futures: How Supporting LGBT+ Young People Enables Them to Thrive in Adulthood* (2023). Available at: <https://www.justlikeus.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Positive-Futures-report-by-Just-Like-Us-compressed-for-mobile.pdf>.

Like Us, which surveyed secondary school pupils in the UK in 2021.<sup>6</sup>

- ✦ The Trevor Project's *2023 U.S. National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ Young People*, which gathered the experiences of more than 28,000 LGBTQ young people aged 13 to 24 across the United States in 2023.<sup>7</sup>

I urge you to take care of your own well-being if the following statistics are triggering for you. Based on my own experiences in school, this information was emotionally challenging to read and even more difficult to write.

## Safe

Between 30% and 50% of LGBTQ+ young people are likely to have experienced bullying, with the data from previous years suggesting that this picture is not improving.

LGBTQ+ pupils are three times more likely to experience sexual harassment (7% of LGBTQ+ pupils have experienced unwanted sexual touching, including 12% of bisexual girls, compared to 2% of their non-LGBTQ+ peers).

Data from across the world indicate that around 41% of LGBTQ+ young people seriously consider attempting suicide each year, including roughly half of transgender and non-binary youth. This statistic is even higher for Black, transgender, and non-binary people, with up to 58% seriously considering suicide.

## Seen

Some 74% of LGBT+ pupils who have never received positive messaging from their school about being LGBT+ have contemplated suicide. However, this rate decreases when schools offer strong positive messaging about being LGBT+.

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6 Just Like Us, *Growing Up LGBT+: The Impact of School, Home and Coronavirus on LGBT+ Young People* (2021). Available at: <https://www.justlikeus.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Just-Like-Us-2021-report-Growing-Up-LGBT.pdf>.

7 The Trevor Project, *2023 U.S. National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ Young People* (2023). Available at: [https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2023/assets/static/05\\_TREVOR05\\_2023survey.pdf](https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2023/assets/static/05_TREVOR05_2023survey.pdf).

In the UK and United States, only around 40% of LGBT+ primary and secondary school staff are out to their pupils, signalling that most LGBT+ teachers feel forced into hiding who they are, their families, or who they are married to while they are at work.

## Supported

Around 15% of LGBTQ+ survey respondents knew they were LGBT+ before they were 11. This means that this is not a secondary school issue; teachers of all age groups should be considering how they support LGBTQ+ children and young people.

LGBTQ+ young people are twice as likely to experience depression, anxiety, and panic attacks as well as to feel lonely and worry about their mental health on a daily basis.

It is very clear from this data that we still have not cracked LGBTQ+ inclusion, but why are we in this situation, and what can we do about it?

## Heteronormativity

After becoming engaged, I was excitedly searching for wedding venues. The first one I looked at was a beautiful, converted barn with incredible views. When I contacted the owner, I was presented with a form which asked for two names: the 'bride' and the 'groom'. Now, for most people, this would not be an issue, and you may be wondering why we did not just throw our names into the fields regardless of what it said, but why should we? If you are a same-sex couple, who goes in the bride slot?

I immediately emailed the venue which responded swiftly – they were absolutely mortified. Within days, the website had been changed to 'Details for the happy couple'. This instance was not an aggression or a deliberate attempt to be prejudiced, but a classic case of an assumption being made that every couple contacting them would be straight, and reminds same-sex couples that they are different to most of society.

Studies from around the world show that between 90% and 97% of people identify as straight,<sup>8</sup> and so it is no wonder that our society is designed for straight people. When you add in the recent history of equal rights, it is no surprise either that our education system has only lately started to reflect the diverse make-up of relationships. The assumption that most people are straight is called heteronormativity and is one of the reasons that LGB+<sup>9</sup> people feel under-represented.

Take children's films. How many films before 2020 featured same-sex parents? How many books in schools include same-sex families as just part of the story without being a teaching point? This results in an impression that being straight is 'normal' and everything outside of that is not. But what about children who have two mums, are fostered or adopted, or are part of the wonderful diversity of families? If they never see families that look like theirs, then what message is society giving to them? It is the same when it comes to discussions around relationships. If in sex education in secondary school, teachers only ever talk about sexual intercourse between a man and a woman, LGB+ pupils may never receive sex education that is relevant to them. This is particularly problematic when sex education is solely focused on reproduction. And, let us be honest, the vast majority of times that consenting adults have sex is not for conception.

Tackling heteronormativity is not about banning pictures of straight couples or making every lesson incorporate LGBTQ+ identities but making sure that the curriculum and wider school environment is representative of all pupils and families.

It can be difficult to let go of this heteronormative view of the world as it can be very ingrained, and often people need to go through a process of 'unlearning' to consider a curriculum outside of their immediate expertise. Moreover, being LGBTQ+ does not make you immune to heteronormativity. As a gay man, I still make assumptions about people's relationships, and my view of the world is still built from a society that is primarily made for straight couples.

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8 Office for National Statistics, Sexual Orientation, England and Wales, Census 2021 (6 January 2023). Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/sexuality/bulletins/sexualorientationenglandandwales/census2021>; <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1270166/lgbt-identification-worldwide>.

9 In Chapter 1, I will explain why I have used LGB+ here and not LGBTQ+ or LGBTQ+.

## You do not know what you do not know

Before you begin your journey, I want you to reflect on your own experiences of LGBTQ+ inclusion, what you understand about it, and what is unknown or unfamiliar territory.

Think about what your education was like in school. Did you get taught what LGBTQ+ means? Did you learn about LGBTQ+ role models? Did you read books with two mums or dads or LGBTQ+ characters in them? For most people, the answer is a resounding no. I would like you to sit with that for a moment and consider why that is.

As you are reading this, you may very well be one of the many teachers or school leaders who might have inklings about where to start or what to do, but you may also be one of the many who does not know where to begin. I want you to take the pressure off yourself because there is a very clear reason why you do not know or are unsure – and it is most likely not your fault.

## The history of LGBTQ+ rights

To help you understand why our society has not yet achieved true equality, we need to jump back in time. The history of LGBTQ+ inclusion is an interesting one, especially when looking at gay rights in particular.

Contrary to many people's beliefs, various cultures throughout history have embraced homosexuality and gender diversity. For example, the ancient Greeks did not have a word for homosexuality in the way that we describe it, and there were many different views on same-sex relationships.<sup>10</sup>

But times changed, and across the globe, often coupled with colonialism, laws criminalising homosexuality were introduced. These

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<sup>10</sup> T. K. Hubbard, *Historical Views of Homosexuality: Ancient Greece*, Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics (2020). Available at: <https://oxfordre.com/politics/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-1242>.

could dramatically change a country's perspective on sexuality and gender, restricting many viewpoints (often through draconian laws) to more 'Western' or 'conservative' views. Although we may think about colonialism existing in the past, some of these laws are still in place, with more than 10 countries still imposing the death penalty for being LGBT+, with post-colonial countries being far more likely to persecute homosexuality.<sup>11</sup>

When people ask why we still need Pride events or why we do not have straight Pride, ask them, in which countries you can be imprisoned or lose your life because you are straight?

## Can you 'catch' being lesbian or gay?

In the UK, although we now have equality for LGBT people in law, this is a relatively recent development, and society is still adapting to these changes.

Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 came into effect during Margaret Thatcher's premiership. It stated that a local authority 'shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality' or 'promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship'.<sup>12</sup>

When we look at the language of the Act, it gives us a good idea of what life was like for many LGBTQ+ people at this time. It prohibits homosexuality being 'promoted', which seems to suggest that you can 'catch' being lesbian or gay, or that reading books with same-sex parents will somehow 'convert' children. This is, of course, utter rubbish. I was born gay. I just did not discover who I was until later because (in part due to this law) I was led to believe that everyone was straight and that it was the 'norm'.

Section 28 had a devastating impact on the growing LGBT equality movement, leading to the closure of a large number of LGBT pupil

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<sup>11</sup> E. Han and J. O'Mahoney, British Colonialism and the Criminalization of Homosexuality, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 27(2) (2014), 268–288. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2013.867298>.

<sup>12</sup> See <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/9/section/28>.

support groups.<sup>13</sup> It also scaremongered schools into not discussing any LGBT relationships in the classroom and essentially ‘straight-washed’ the education system. Even though there were openly gay people in the media and local communities, generally schools did not discuss them, and the Act denied this visibility, creating a climate of negativity and fear.<sup>14</sup> This law (which no local authority was ever prosecuted under because it was so unworkable) led to many people, like me, not even knowing that other LGBT people existed until much later in life.

Now, when someone like Sir Ian McKellen campaigns for something, you need to take note, and that is exactly what happened. There were campaigns against Section 28 from the start. Around the UK, there were many protests and marches using the slogan ‘Stop the Clause’, and campaigners such as McKellen lobbied for Section 28 to be repealed. The irony, of course, is that what many viewed as a culture war machine for gaining votes by the then Conservative government actually inspired one of the fastest growing civil rights movements in history. With rapidly changing views towards homosexuality, the law was repealed in Scotland in 2000 in one of the first acts of the new Scottish Parliament. It was repealed in the rest of the UK in 2003. But we have to consider that this is only 22 years prior to the writing of this book. Most teachers and parents will have been schooled at a time when Section 28 was in force, and inevitably it will have shaped their views on LGBTQ+ inclusion and rights.

## The impact of history

You may be wondering how an Act of Parliament that was repealed over two decades ago is still having an impact in the UK today. But this is where we come back to the original point: you do not know what you do not know. I have worked with lots of teachers and school leaders who are still dealing with the mental-health implications of having to hide their identity for so long. It also means that

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<sup>13</sup> Knitting Circle, Section 28 Gleanings (1989). Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20070818063344/http://www.knittingcircle.org.uk/gleanings2889.html>.

<sup>14</sup> V. Iglowski-Broad, Section 28: Impact, Fightback and Repeal, *National Archives* (2023). Available at: <https://beta.nationalarchives.gov.uk/explore-the-collection/stories/section-28-impact-fightback-repeal>. See also Just Like Us, *Positive Futures*.

most teachers and school leaders have never themselves experienced what an inclusive LGBTQ+ education looks like or know what it should contain.

And so, when beginning this journey, it will be helpful for you to accept that there are some things outside of your immediate area of expertise and knowledge – and, for now, that is fine. But, from here on, I would ask you to carefully consider how you can use external and internal voices to support you to shape an approach to improving LGBTQ+ inclusion and fill in those gaps that were created by society through oppressive measures such as Section 28.

## **So, what can you do?**

Improving the lives of LGBTQ+ young people is not an impossible task. Although the data may appear dire, the statistics also show that when LGBTQ+ young people are in a supportive environment, their mental health and well-being improves significantly. Through the principles of being safe, seen, and supported, you can make sure that young people get the education and environment they need to flourish.

As someone whose time in school was far from being safe, seen, and supported, I am personally grateful for you taking this step to making a difference to so many children, young people, and families.



## Chapter 1

# What the LGBTQIA+! Vocabulary, Language, and Concepts

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**L**ittle did I know that my life, which was previously full of Pat Sharp and *ThunderCats*, would be so different in secondary school. Starting Year 7 was exciting, daunting, and overwhelming, but like many Year 7s, I was looking forward to it. I went to one of the biggest secondary schools in the country; it was spread over three sites and felt like a small town. I grew up in Bridgend, South Wales, which had a huge ex-mining and rugby culture. I was very sporty and academic, so I should have fitted right in. But there was one problem: no matter what I was good at, I was the wrong sort of boy.

My parents were eager for me to begin secondary school and bought me a brand new blazer to wear on my first day. Unfortunately for me, blazers were optional and not one other person wore one. I soon became known as 'blazer boy'. (Ian Eagleton, if you're reading this, let's write a book together called *Blazer Boy*; I can only imagine his superpowers and the adventures he will go on.) This was my first experience of name-calling in school, and as anyone who has experienced it knows, it is always more unpleasant than it seems. There was a huge culture of 'banter', and this constant ribbing of one another covered up a nasty undercurrent that was part of the fabric of the school. So many pupils were either subject to or perpetrators of this banter that it was often impossible to tell what was good-natured ribbing and what was simply an insult.

Within a few weeks of starting school, I learned a new word: gay. This word was used as a jeer to taunt and bully me. At first it was a small group of boys in my year group, but soon pupils in other year groups were using it too. I have no idea why I was

targeted. I certainly didn't ever use or identify with the word at that time. I have often wondered what it was they saw in me that meant gay was applicable to me. Was it that I was a bit camp? Was it because I was blonde, quiet, and a bit of a geek, so I was an easy target? Some may say that 'You can always tell,' but if that was true then all gay kids would be bullied (which they aren't, although they are more likely to be) and no one who isn't gay would be bullied using that word (which isn't the case). At this time, the word 'gay' was prevalent as an insult, and I certainly wasn't the only one being tormented by its use.

Sadly, the insults and bullying did not stop at the word 'gay'. In Year 7 alone, I was also called names such as 'queer', 'faggot', and 'poof'. I was spat at. Rumours were spread about me. I had my bag stolen. I went from being a kid who loved school to someone who dreaded every moment between lessons. For the first time in school, I became silly; I started messing around and being the class clown. But who wouldn't when you would do anything you could to cheer yourself up? As a primary teacher for 17 years, I often saw pupils I had taught transform in this way at secondary school and would wonder what had happened to make them go so off the rails. But in the whole of Year 7, no one ever thought to check if I was okay or to question why I was so different from when I was at primary school. I still feel today that I was just a number, just a statistic, and just seen en masse rather than as an individual who needed nurture and support.

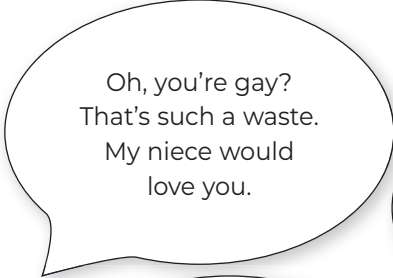
The bullying went on for a year, and by Year 8 I'd had enough. I went to the deputy head teacher and told him everything: what had happened, who did it, where and when. And then he said the immortal words that I will never forget: 'Just fit in like everyone else and the bullying will go away.' When I tell people this, I get a range of responses from shock to disgust to disbelief. But I did exactly what he said. After all, this was the person who was supposed to be responsible for ensuring my well-being, so why wouldn't I do what he advised?

I started copying what everyone else wore. I pretended to like certain music. I pretended to like certain people. I pretended to like certain TV shows. All to hide. All to pretend that I was someone I was not. I began to lead a double life where home-lan and

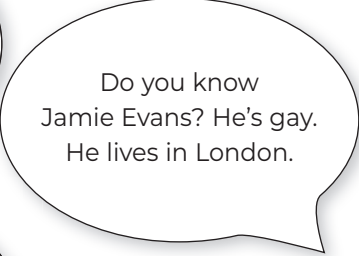
school-Ian were two completely different people. At home I watched *Star Trek*. In school I spoke about sports. At home I liked 1990s pop and boybands. In school I liked indie bands. At home I thought about the handsome boys in my year group. In school I had girlfriend after girlfriend.

And did the bullying go away? Of course it didn't. The name-calling continued; I just stopped telling people about it. Perhaps if the other pupils had understood what it meant to be gay, and the school had a clear strategy on bullying and a culture of care and empathy, then the next six years of school wouldn't have been the hellscape that it was. And perhaps I wouldn't be experiencing the anxiety and depression I still grapple with today.

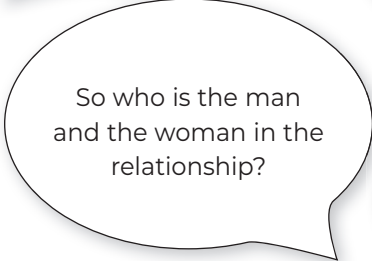
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Oh, you're gay?  
That's such a waste.  
My niece would  
love you.



Do you know  
Jamie Evans? He's gay.  
He lives in London.



So who is the man  
and the woman in the  
relationship?



When did you  
decide that you  
were gay?

**It's More Than Flags and Rainbows is an inspirational handbook that provides teachers with step-by-step guidance for the creation of truly inclusive schools where every child feels safe, seen, and supported.**

Drawing upon his own lived experience as an LGBTQ+ individual and educator, Ian Timbrell helps schools develop the confidence and the know-how to embed inclusivity as a consistent and sustained part of school life, moving beyond token gestures and performative flags and rainbows.

Written with warmth, passion, and empathy, this groundbreaking book encourages teachers and school leaders to think 'beyond the rainbow', inviting them to create meaningful and lasting change for the LGBTQ+ students in their care.

**Essential reading for head teachers, teachers, pastoral leads, or anyone passionate about LGBTQ+ inclusion and diversity in schools.**



I wish had been given this book as a core text at the start of teaching. It would have been simultaneously enlightening and affirming of my values and passions within education. Furthermore, the explanations of terminology and the considered reasons for doing or not doing particular actions are very clear.

**Juliet Robertson, education consultant and author of *Blood Lines*, *Dirty Teaching*, and *Messy Maths***

Ian shares his lived experience as a gay man, his practical knowledge as a former teacher, and his expertise as an LGBTQ+ diversity and inclusion consultant to create a thought-provoking guide for educators. This book is a great and timely addition to the field of LGBTQ+ inclusive education!

**Jo Brassington and Dr Adam Brett, founders and hosts of *Pride & Progress***

This book will be enormously helpful to those responsible for schools, whether as governor, school leader, or with local authority or MAT responsibilities. Ian Timbrell offers a coherent approach with guidelines for decisions and advice on best ways forward, all with sensitivity and always in the best interests of young people.

**Mick Waters, educationalist and author**

As a gay teacher who, like so many before him, had a torrid time at school – experiencing no positive mention of homosexuality and suffering bouts of homophobic bullying – he writes with passion and knowledge in the hope of making sure that another generation does not have to suffer as he did.

**Sue Sanders, she/her, professor emeritus, CEO of Schools OUT, co-founder of UK LGBT+ History Month**



**Ian Timbrell** is the founder of More Than Flags and Rainbows, a not-for-profit organisation that supports schools and charities with LGBTQ+ inclusion. He is an Independent Thinking Associate and has delivered inspiring talks and workshops across the UK that empower educators to tackle homophobic bullying, embrace equity, and foster inclusivity.

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