

**Embracing the Rainbow: Approaches to  
Exploring Issues Concerning the LGBT  
Community in Primary Schools in Northern  
Ireland**

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**Abstract**

This study is in response to an interest into the experiences of young people who identify as members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) community in Northern Ireland. It sets out to research the experiences of LGBT young people in primary education in Northern Ireland, as well as the perceptions, experiences and approaches of primary teachers towards the exploration of LGBT issues in the classroom. The study used a “mixed-methods” approach to obtain data, which allowed a combination of quantitative and qualitative data to be acquired. This added objectivity and verification to the conclusions drawn from the results. The study has found that the experiences of LGBT young people in primary education in Northern Ireland are improving, but that they still face profound difficulties, due to the attitudes of society and the lack of progress in schools and the Northern Ireland Primary Curriculum. The overall conclusions are that in order for LGBT young people to thrive in primary schools in Northern Ireland, teachers need to be better prepared and supported through increased production of curricular resources, as exemplified by other schools and organisations around the world and in Northern Ireland, itself. This study therefore informs the production of a resource pack, *Embracing the Rainbow*<sup>1</sup>, which will act as an aid to primary school teachers in the exploration of LGBT issues with their pupils. It also challenges The Council for Curriculum, Exams and Assessment (CCEA) to evaluate and improve its strategies for supporting teachers in this aspect of their pedagogy and pastoral role in schools.

**Introduction**

The Office for National Statistics (2012) concluded in its Integrated Household Survey of over 170, 000 respondents that approximately 1.1 per cent of the population in Northern Ireland identify as either “Gay”, “Lesbian” or “Bisexual”. However, 2.9 per cent of respondents were placed in the category of “Don’t know/Refusal”, meaning they either did not want to label their sexual orientation, or refused to disclose their sexual orientation. This may suggest that there was a reluctance from some people to disclose their sexuality at the time, or were unsure of how to identify themselves. However, the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (n.d.) suggest that children as young as eight years old may begin to question their sexuality, and from early teenage years, begin to identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual. This would therefore suggest that some of these people in Northern Ireland are reluctant to admit that they are not heterosexual, but for what reason?

In this paper I aim to investigate the current situation of how primary schools in Northern Ireland are supporting and encouraging a greater understanding and acceptance of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) community amongst their pupils, as well as staff. It will focus specifically on how

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<sup>1</sup>Enquiries about the resource can be made to Noel by this contact email - [noelbj@gmail.com](mailto:noelbj@gmail.com) - but that it is hoped it will be available online in the near future

**Citation**

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well teachers are supported and informed on approaching these issues in the classroom, and how this affects the pastoral care element of their professionalism.

The study will focus on how issues concerning the LGBT community are approached in primary schools in Northern Ireland, as well as how this is achieved in other school contexts, in order to make conclusions on how to better facilitate a greater understanding and acceptance of the LGBT community amongst pupils and staff.

This study is important because it is an area within primary education which is not approached as intently as others in Northern Ireland. Boyd (2011:1) argues that school staff in Northern Ireland lack the “capacity, confidence or will” to tackle LGBT issues, and reports that in 2002, Ofsted concluded that schools were not taking enough action in response to homophobic bullying. It is also important, due to the rapidly changing society we are preparing our pupils to enter, which is becoming increasingly more diverse. However, statistically, the LGBT community is still one of the most discriminated against and misunderstood groups of people in our society. Jarman and Tennant (2003:11) state that there is still “widespread homophobia” in our society. Therefore it is important that educators become better informed and prepared to approach issues concerning LGBT people with their pupils.

The intended outcomes of this project are:

- To research the attitudes of schools and teachers in Northern Ireland towards the teaching of LGBT issues inside and outside of the classroom
- To investigate the resources and approaches which may already be currently used in primary schools in Northern Ireland to explore these issues
- To generate conclusions on how well LGBT issues are represented in the primary school context in Northern Ireland
- To research current and relevant literature concerning how education on LGBT issues is approached in other parts of the world
- To create a resource pack aimed at better supporting teachers and schools in exploring LGBT issues with their pupils
- These objectives lead to the following questions, which this project will aim to answer:
  - What are the experiences of LGBT people (including young people) in Northern Ireland?
  - What are primary school teachers’ attitudes towards and experiences of exploring LGBT issues in the classroom in Northern Ireland?
  - What provisions are being made to facilitate the teaching of LGBT issues in primary schools in Northern Ireland by schools and by the primary curriculum?
  - What can we learn from the approaches being used by schools in other education systems about exploring LGBT issues, as well as from the perspectives of other relevant organisations, and how can we allow these to inform our own approach as primary educators in Northern Ireland?

### **Literature Review**

When exploring how issues surrounding the LGBT community are approached in primary schools in Northern Ireland, it is firstly important to investigate the general quality of life of the people who identify as part of this community in our country. As mentioned before, The Office for National Statistics (2012) found that 1.1 per cent of the population in Northern Ireland identify as either “Gay”, “Lesbian” or “Bisexual”, with 2.9 per cent of respondents placed in the category of “Don’t know/Refusal”. By 2014, the percentage of those who identified as a member of this community had risen to 1.6 per cent out of

325, 000 respondents (ONS, 2015:7). Therefore, it seems that an increasing number of people in Northern Ireland are formally identifying themselves as either gay, lesbian or bisexual. Yet, this group of people is still nevertheless a very small minority, compared to the rest of the Northern Irish population. The Family Planning Association (2014) agrees that the LGBT population in Northern Ireland is now more noticeable, but argues that LGBT young people in Northern Ireland are facing difficulties when trying to come to terms with their own sexuality and identities. Loudes (2003:3) supports this research, stating that LGB people in Northern Ireland “encounter some important obstacles because of their multiple identities”, further listing these obstacles as “prejudices”, “homophobia” and “violence”. Jarman and Tennant (2003:10) agree that one way the LGB community’s increased visibility in Northern Ireland has impacted them negatively is that it has made them “easier to target” by those who deem “queer-bashing” to be socially acceptable. They (2003:10) argue that homophobia and LGB discrimination is still considered “normal” and “justifiable” by many in Northern Ireland, making it even more difficult for lesbian, gay and bisexual people to “come out” and live with their sexual identities in a public way.

Furthermore, as with many societal issues in Northern Ireland, it seems that religion also affects how people perceive those who identify as LGBT, and thus the experiences of LGBT people living in Northern Ireland. Jarman and Tennant (2003) suggest that the unique culture and history of Northern Ireland have contributed to the negative treatment of LGBT people, particularly by those in the religious sections of our society. O’Hara (2005) also reports Jarman as commenting that hostility towards the LGBT community in Northern Ireland from some religious factions is very tangible and impacts on people’s thoughts and behaviour. McAlister, Carr and Neill (2014) agree that as found in previous research, religion in Northern Ireland is associated with either positive or negative perceptions of lesbian or gay people. They (2014) report that the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey in 2012 found that those who identify as members of the Protestant tradition are more likely to show negative attitudes towards the LGBT community than those who identify as Catholic or having no religion. They (2014) also observe this difference in people’s views on same-sex marriage, reporting that 66 per cent of Catholics surveyed supported the idea, compared to 45 per cent of Protestants. It is therefore evident that the role of religion in the attitudes towards LGBT people is a divisive one. This is even apparent in the anti-discrimination legislation in Northern Ireland. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (2011) dictates that the Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations (NI) 2003 forbids employers in Northern Ireland from discriminating against people in their employment on the grounds of sexual orientation. However, they (2011: 9) give one exception to this law where the “employment is for the purposes of an organized religion”, meaning it is legal for organisations to discriminate against LGBT people if it conflicts with their religious doctrines or beliefs. This, therefore, makes it legally possible for LGBT people to face discrimination in Northern Ireland.

However, the disapproval of the LGBT community is not solely amongst the adult population in Northern Ireland, but is also prevalent in young people. For example, Schubotz, Simpson and Rolston (2002) found in their health survey of one thousand young people in Northern Ireland aged between fourteen and twenty-four years old that over half of the respondents viewed sex between men as wrong. This apparent disapproval amongst young people towards the LGBT community is evidently impacting on LGBT young people’s experience of education. Boyd (2011: 1) highlights the “single greatest threat” to LGBT youth as homophobic bullying, describing it as “rife” in schools across Northern Ireland. He (2011:1) further defines it as a “pattern of language, behaviour or harassment, motivated by anti-gay prejudice or animus”. He (2011) also suggests that victims of homophobic bullying are less likely to report their experiences to teachers or family members, which can lead to feelings of isolation. He (2011:1) argues that this prevalence of homophobic bullying in schools across Northern Ireland is due to a “climate” in schools, which promotes the ideal that anyone who is not heterosexual is “abnormal,

wrong and undeserving of respect". His research found that schools, by not intervening, were approving of this climate.

In a survey conducted amongst fourteen to twenty-five year old lesbian, gay and bisexual young people in Northern Ireland, 98 per cent of respondents admitted that they had heard homophobic language, such as "that's so gay" or "bent", at school (Boyd, 2011:21). The respondents also disclosed that 99 per cent of the people they heard using this language were students, with 26 per cent of those people being teachers (Boyd, 2011:21). Furthermore, Boyd (2011) found that these young people believed 88 per cent of staff heard this homophobic language, yet 72 per cent of respondents answered that staff ignored the homophobic language. Boyd (2011) therefore argues that these findings show that schools in Northern Ireland have little concern for their LGB students and are not adequately protecting them.

Such strong statistics lead us to investigate which approaches the Northern Ireland education system is currently using in response to the issues of homophobic bullying and discrimination. The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) (n.d.) reports that in 2006, all primary schools in Northern Ireland were given a statutory responsibility to explore Relationships and Sexuality Education as part of the Personal Development and Mutual Understanding area of learning of the Northern Ireland Primary Curriculum. With regards to support for LGBT pupils, it (n.d.:12) informs that a young person's sexual orientation, as well as gender identity, is a "central and significant part of who they are and how they see themselves in relation to others", while also enforcing the principle that children must feel safe and self-assured without the fear of bullying or being treated differently. It (n.d.:12) advises that Relationships and Sexuality Education should focus on appreciating the individuality of each pupil, by promoting "inclusivity, equality and respect for all pupils". However, it (n.d.) admits to the failings of primary schools in tackling homophobic bullying, as previously highlighted by Boyd, assessing that homophobic bullying and the use of homophobic language is not being recognised or suitably addressed in some schools across Northern Ireland. It (n.d.) dictates that schools should ensure that their pupils know that the use of such language is unacceptable, and that such behaviour is challenged in a child-friendly way. It (n.d.) also suggests a whole-school approach to tackling homophobic bullying, including measures such as adding homophobic bullying to schools' anti-bullying policies, raising awareness about homophobic bullying and putting in effective systems for reporting bullying.

CCEA also provides some additional resources for primary schools to help them teach pupils about diversity, acceptance and inclusion on a general level. For example, it (n.d.: 5) has provided the *Living. Learning. Together.* resource pack, which aids teachers in facilitating the exploration of issues pertaining to identity, "Personal Understanding and Health", "Mutual Understanding in the Local and Wider Community" and diversity with pupils across all seven primary year groups. However, apart from these resources, there is no further direction or support provided by the curriculum for schools and teachers in Northern Ireland, with regards to approaching LGBT issues and tackling bullying towards LGBT pupils. Therefore, it may be helpful to investigate how other education systems in the United Kingdom and further afield explore such issues in the primary context, in order to learn of more useful methods concerning this area of education. Sears (1999:4) suggests that educators need to "queer elementary education", meaning not to sexualise the classroom or their pupils, but to transform classrooms into ones, which "challenge categorical thinking, promote interpersonal intelligence, and foster critical consciousness", in order to tackle homophobia and heteronormativity. Murray (2014) reports of an investigation carried out by British scholars, DePalma and Atkinson (2009), entitled the *No Outsiders Project*, which investigated heteronormativity in their own pedagogy. DePalma and Atkinson (2009), [cited in Murray (2015:26)] advocated for the inclusion of "queer content and conversation" in the primary classroom and highlighted the positive effects of challenging heterosexism in schools. They

(2009:839) advise teachers that their methodology for promoting the inclusion of LGBT pupils must be more than just an “anti-bullying” approach, but should actively seek to include discussions of sexuality and gender into their curriculum. This approach is therefore recommending that teachers are not merely against homophobic bullying in their methodology, but are purposefully incorporating discussions about LGBT issues in the classroom. Sadowski (2016:34) agrees, suggesting that when considering how to make their learning spaces more supportive for LGBT pupils, educators should no longer think only in terms of safety, as has been the case in the past, but should try to “do better”. He (2016) remarks, for example, on how a school in Massachusetts has over half of its students discussing LGBT identities in one term. He (2016) also explains how a school in New York uses displays in its halls to showcase its acceptance and inclusion of LGBT students, including a family tree poster depicting a family with two mothers. Therefore, the literature seems to suggest that schools in other systems are aiming to support their LGBT pupils beyond just protecting them from bullying or violence. These schools are understanding the importance of creating inclusive classrooms and communities and of learning spaces that encourage the discussion of LGBT issues.

Therefore, it seems that there is a body of literature, which begins to answer the research questions posed by this study. In particular, the review of this literature appears to highlight the following five themes in its attempts to answer the questions originally set out:

- **Experiences of LGBT people in Northern Ireland** There is increased visibility today of people identifying as Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay or Transgender in Northern Ireland, including young people, compared to previous years. However, due to the negative perceptions of people of all ages, the experiences of LGBT people in being accepted into mainstream society have not improved greatly.
- **Homophobic bullying** Homophobic bullying is still a prevalent issue in schools in Northern Ireland, which is not being adequately addressed by teachers and schools as institutions.
- **Inclusive school environments and support from the curriculum** Despite encouragement from the Northern Ireland Primary Curriculum, primary schools in Northern Ireland are generally not fostering learning environments which promote the inclusion of LGBT pupils as well as they could. Furthermore, apart from a small number of brief curricular supplements, there is currently little direction or support being given to primary school teachers in Northern Ireland for addressing LGBT issues with their pupils.
- **Pedagogical approaches to exploring LGBT issues** Generally, primary school teachers in Northern Ireland are not adequately addressing LGBT issues in their classrooms. However, examples can be found of good practice in approaching LGBT issues in schools from scholars and schools in other parts of the world. Most notably, research seems to suggest that schools should aim to not just promote the physical safety of LGBT pupils, but should also help these students to thrive and should actively encourage discussion of LGBT issues in their classrooms.

### **Methodology**

Throughout my literary research when completing the literature review of this study, it became evident that there were many possible focuses to take when carrying out my own personal research on this area of how LGBT issues are approached in the primary school in Northern Ireland. Indeed, for example, the issues of how Northern Ireland’s religious and political history and culture affect the climate for inclusion for LGBT young people seemed very intriguing to me. Moreover, young people’s attitudes

toward LGBT rights in Northern Ireland, including the issue of same-sex marriage, were an interesting aspect of LGBT young people's experiences, which I would have found very beneficial to research in a more in-depth way. However, as I refined and synthesised my research focus for this project, I came to the conclusion that, due to the scale of this study, as well as the palpable sensitivity surrounding its themes, I could only practically and ethically focus on a select few issues. Therefore, in response to the themes previously identified from the information acquired through reading and through thoughtful consideration, I was led to forming the following research questions:

- What are student teachers' and primary school teachers' sentiments towards exploring LGBT issues with their pupils in Northern Ireland?
- What are student teachers' and primary school teachers' experiences of exploring LGBT issues with their pupils in Northern Ireland?
- With regards to the issue of homophobic bullying, do student teachers' and primary teachers' professional experiences in Northern Ireland reflect what the literature suggests?
- What can we learn from the perspectives of other related parties, including LGBT youth advocacy groups at home and abroad, and governmental bodies which promote equality and inclusion, with regards to the current climate in primary schools for LGBT youth inclusion and future prospects for this climate to be fostered?

Thus, the intention was that the answers to these questions would both add to the information and data already acquired from the literature, and either confirm or debate some of the other discoveries made from the literature.

Once I had refined my research focus into these questions, I then needed to decide which research methods I was going to employ, in order to gain the relevant data to provide some answers. Ultimately, I decided to use a "mixed-methods" approach, in order to retrieve the data I required. Creswell (2003:12) defines this research method as a "pragmatic" approach, which allows the researcher to "draw liberally from both quantitative and qualitative assumptions" when engaging in his or her research. There are many advantages to using this type of research approach, including that it can improve the accuracy of the data acquired (Denscombe, 2008). However, the main rationale for my choice of this type of methodology was, as Denscombe (2008) also suggests, that it allowed me as the researcher to present a more comprehensive picture of the issue, by merging information from various data sources. The previous research I had carried out in the literature review showed me that issues surrounding the LGBT community can be divisive and sensitive, and that opinions can vary. Therefore, by using this kind of research approach, I was able to gain a broader perspective, which fostered greater objectivity in my enquiry.

The actual methods used in this "mixed methods" approach were also decided carefully, and approved through the St. Mary's University College Student Ethics Process. As previously stated, the themes involved in this study are sensitive and sometimes polarising. Therefore, I needed to use specific methods which treated the issues of the study with the same sensitivity. This led me to acquire much of my data using anonymous questionnaires. One questionnaire was administered in digital form through the website, *SurveyMonkey.com*, to fifteen current primary school teachers in different parts of Northern Ireland and consisted of ten questions concerning their opinions and experiences of LGBT issues in their professional careers. I obtained results by making initial contact with the teachers through email, requesting their participation in the study and, upon approval, sending them the link to the online questionnaire, which they completed. The other questionnaire was given in paper form in person to twenty current fourth year primary education students from St. Mary's University College, Belfast, and

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also consisted of ten questions concerning the same themes. I obtained results by approaching students on the St. Mary's University College campus, verifying that they were fourth year primary students, explaining the study and its purpose to them and asking them to take part in the questionnaire. Completed surveys were then stored in a secure confidential envelope, only accessible to me, the researcher.

My reasoning for choosing this sample of respondents was in response to the first three research questions, which I previously identified. I wanted to investigate the attitudes and experiences of both teachers who are currently working in the field and students who are about to enter the field concerning LGBT issues in the curriculum, homophobic bullying and LGBT-inclusive environments in primary schools. The questionnaires elicited only quantitative results, which was important for this study because, as McIntyre (1999:1-1) as quoted by Glasow (2005), suggests, quantitative research such as questionnaires can "elicit information about attitudes", which cannot be done as well by using other methods, such as observation.

It was important for me to keep this questionnaire anonymous by not asking for any identifiers, such as the respondent's name, age or the school they worked at, due to the sensitivity and even controversy surrounding the themes that were being asked about. However, even while maintaining this level of anonymity, Bell (1996), as quoted by Glasow (2005), warns that questionnaires can allow for bias to occur, especially when respondents feel they should give a certain answer or are afraid to answer honestly. This limitation may have been present in the responses I received through the questionnaires, considering the polarity of opinion surrounding the LGBT community and education, as illustrated through the literature previously assessed. However, I communicated clearly to each participant prior to their completion of the questionnaire that participation in the study was anonymous.

The second method I decided to use was semi-structured interviews with one representative from three different organisations, including *Cara-Friend*, *The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland* and *THRIVE Southwest PA (THRIVE SWPA)*. I decided to use this method, in order to gain more qualitative results, which are useful because, as Kothari (2004) identifies, they allow the researcher to gauge how people feel or think about certain subjects. My rationale for choosing this sample of respondents was in response to the fourth research question, which I previously outlined. I was interested to discover how representatives from LGBT advocacy bodies viewed the current state of affairs for LGBT young people in Northern Ireland as well as one perspective of the current climate in the United States, but I was even more interested in their suggestions for what could be included in a new resource pack for teachers for approaching LGBT issues in their schools.

I obtained results by making initial contact with the three representatives and arranging suitable times to be interviewed. The interviews for the representatives from *Cara-Friend* and *The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland* consisted of four open-ended questions about their impressions of the general climate towards LGBT young people in primary schools in Northern Ireland and their advice for professionals in approaching LGBT issues with their students. The interview also asked for respondents to offer suggestions as to the composition of a resource pack, which could help support teachers in their approaches to LGBT issues with their students. The interview for the representative from *THRIVE Southwest PA (THRIVE SWPA)* consisted of four questions concerning similar themes, but in the context of the United States of America.

### **Presentation and Analysis of Data**

The data collected through the methods previously outlined attempt to answer the original research

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questions of this study. In particular, it informs the identified themes which have emerged as a result of the review of literature. However, it is important to note that certain methods of collecting data, and in turn the actual data collected, by their natures, respond to certain themes more predominantly than others. The data collected are presented in tabular form for each theme.

*Experiences of LGBT People in Northern Ireland*

For the first theme of this study, a multitude of diverse data was collected. A summary of the data can be found in Table 1.

**Table 1.**

<b>Professional teacher questionnaire</b>	46% of respondents reported to having suspected that one (or more) of their pupils may have been LGBT during their careers. 54% of respondents reported to not having suspected this. On average, respondents were unsure as to whether Northern Ireland is a place where LGBT young people can thrive.
<b>Final year student teacher questionnaire</b>	On average, respondents were unsure of whether Northern Ireland is a place where LGBT young people can thrive. 56% suspected having at least one LGBT pupil in their class during their blocks of School Experience.
<b>Interview with the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland</b>	Interviewee expressed that life can be difficult for LGBT people in Northern Ireland. However, lobby groups are growing stronger and the organisation receives few complaints related to discrimination based on sexual orientation. Interviewee suggested this may be due to victims being too frightened to report incidents. Interviewee reported that young people who report same sex attraction are more likely to “self-exclude” themselves from school, which can negatively impact their educational attainment.
<b>Interview with Cara-Friend</b>	Interviewee reported that life for LGBT people in Northern Ireland is “better than it was” even 5 years ago. He commented on how there are more LGBT young people being open about themselves, compared to previous years. However, there are still challenges which they face. Interviewee reported on the “constant debate” about the “validity” of LGBT people and their rights, which “wears people down”. Interviewee described LGBT young people’s “self-loathing”, stemming from a similar impression from society that says LGBT people are “not normal”.
<b>Interview with THRIVE SWPA</b>	Interviewee expressed that the climate for LGBT young people in Northern Ireland seems to be “much more hostile or questionable” compared to that of his home city in the USA. Interviewee commented that more primary schools in the USA seem to be making a “specific effort” to be “LGBT-inclusive”, compared to Northern Ireland.

This data seems to show a number of key patterns for observation, with regards to the experiences of LGBT people in Northern Ireland. Firstly, there is an evident ambiguity about whether Northern Ireland is a place where LGBT young people can thrive and live successfully, as expressed by the data from the two questionnaires. This shows that those in the teaching profession are generally unsure if LGBT young people are able to live happy lives in Northern Ireland, which is even more strongly supported from the data acquired through the three interviews. Although the consensus suggests that life is becoming easier for LGBT people in Northern Ireland, there is a strong sentiment that the quality of life for young



people who identify as LGBT is not as high as it could or should be, with obstacles such as fear, the perceived negative opinions of the general public and LGBT young people’s self-perception having a role to play in the negative experiences of this group of young people in our society. This correlates with the information and trends found in the review of literature, which documented that LGBT young people in Northern Ireland are facing several challenges that are impeding on their quality of life.

Secondly, the data for this aspect of the study suggest that the visibility of LGBT young people is on the rise. The two questionnaires indicate that professional teachers and final year student teachers alike have suspected they have had at least one LGBT pupil in their classes during their careers, while the interview with *Cara-Friend* proposes that more LGBT young people are being open about themselves in society. This confirms what the literature has suggested, signifying that LGBT young people are becoming more confident about showing this part of their identities to those around them. However, as documented by the literature, this increased visibility brings with it more challenges for LGBT young people.

Therefore, it is evident that there are more documented instances of LGBT young people in our primary schools. However, they are living in a place which may not necessarily support them as fully as it could, and this, in turn, is posing great challenges for them in living content lives.

### ***Homophobic Bullying***

The data just presented suggest that there is still a trend of LGBT young people facing increased difficulty in living in Northern Ireland, compared to their heterosexual peers. The most documented challenge is homophobic bullying, the data surrounding which are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.**

<b>Professional teacher questionnaire</b>	23% of respondents reported to having witnessed some form of homophobic bullying during their career, with 77% of respondents reporting that they did not witness such activity.
<b>Final year student teacher questionnaire</b>	50% reported witnessing some form of homophobic bullying during their blocks of School Experience.
<b>Interview with the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland</b>	Interviewee reported that young people who identify as LGBT are more likely to be bullied in school than their heterosexual peers. Many victims do not report such bullying, with a predominant fear being that “their school would not take their experiences seriously”. Interviewee commented that most young people who report LGBT bullying believe that the school did not take their incident seriously and that their school did not take any action. Interviewee believed that schools in Northern Ireland are “reluctant” to address homophobic bullying as seriously as other forms of bullying. Interviewee highlighted that a high percentage of LGBT young people who underachieve in school tend to be bullied.
<b>Interview with <i>Cara-Friend</i></b>	Interviewee reported an increase in homophobic bullying in schools in Northern Ireland, despite the general public thinking the situation has gotten better.

<b>Interview with THRIVE SWPA</b>	Interviewee expressed that teachers need to address homophobic bullying “directly and specifically”, and that they should use instances of homophobic bullying as learning opportunities for their classes. However, he also warned that teachers need to show sensitivity when responding to instances of homophobic bullying and that it is easy for teachers to “make situations worse” for LGBT young people.
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There seems to be a clear disagreement amongst the data regarding this issue of homophobic bullying in primary schools in Northern Ireland. The majority of teaching professionals claim that they have never witnessed any form of homophobic bullying, while final year teaching students are divided on whether they have witnessed this activity. However, the interviews with the *Equality Commission for Northern Ireland* and *Cara-Friend* indicate that homophobic bullying is not only prevalent in schools in Northern Ireland, but is, in fact, increasing in its frequency. Therefore, it is important to seek an explanation for this discrepancy in the data.

Such an explanation may indeed be found in the data themselves. Data from one interview suggest that a majority of LGBT young people who have experienced bullying in schools believe their schools neither treated their situations seriously, nor responded to them at all. The literature previously reviewed supported this view, concluding that schools in Northern Ireland showed little attention to the challenges faced by their LGBT pupils. Therefore, a possible explanation for the inconsistency in the data is that homophobic bullying in primary schools in Northern Ireland is very much prevalent, yet is not being caught or recognised by teachers. This could be due to the “reluctance” of schools to address this form of bullying, as identified by one interview, or due to the general public thinking that the situation for LGBT young people has gotten better, as identified by another interview.

Either way, it is important that teachers heed the advice given by the interview from *THRIVE SWPA*. Teachers must become more vigilant to homophobic bullying and respond to cases in “direct”, “specific”, but “sensitive” ways.

#### *Inclusive School Environments and Support from the Curriculum*

The review of literature identified homophobic bullying as an important aspect of supporting LGBT pupils in primary schools. However, it also challenged schools to move beyond this approach and to seek to foster inclusive school environments with the support of the curriculum. Table 3. below summarises the data acquired about these concepts.

**Table 3.**

<b>Professional teacher questionnaire</b>	On average, respondents somewhat agreed that the schools in which they teach foster an ethos which promote inclusion of LGBT pupils. On average, respondents somewhat disagreed that there were adequate resources and support provided for teachers in exploring LGBT issues with their pupils.
<b>Final year student teacher questionnaire</b>	On average, respondents were unsure of whether the schools in which they had taught fostered an ethos which promote LGBT inclusion. On average, respondents strongly disagreed that enough resources and support were provided for primary school teachers to approach LGBT issues with their pupils.

<p><b>Interview with the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland</b></p>	<p>Interviewee expressed that not as many primary schools in Northern Ireland are making an intentional effort to be more LGBT inclusive, compared to post-primary schools.</p> <p>Interviewee cited examples of “openly LGBT” teachers who stand up for themselves and their identities, which fosters a more inclusive environment in the school.</p> <p>Interviewee stated that it is the responsibility of CCEA to develop curricula for primary schools in Northern Ireland, and that schools should therefore seek guidance from them regarding exploring LGBT issues with their pupils.</p>
<p><b>Interview with Cara-Friend</b></p>	<p>Interviewee stated that it is important for schools to “normalise” being LGBT, in order to achieve an inclusive school environment. He compared such efforts to schools’ responses to sectarianism to Northern Ireland, suggesting that inclusivity needs to “stretch beyond” religious identity and include all elements of a young person’s identity.</p>
<p><b>Interview with THRIVE SWPA</b></p>	<p>Interviewee mentioned that “age-appropriate” ways to bring LGBT elements into the curriculum are important for fostering inclusive environments in primary schools.</p> <p>Interviewee highlighted the power of story and literacy in the curriculum as a means of bringing in LGBT issues into the classroom.</p>

The data collected give some indication of how well primary schools in Northern Ireland are currently fostering LGBT-inclusive environments and how well the curriculum is supporting teachers to do this. Interestingly, professional teachers generally claim that the schools in which they teach provide inclusive environments, while the student teachers are unsure of this fact. One explanation for this slight disagreement could be that student teachers have no current loyalty to the schools they are referring to, allowing them to be completely honest in their evaluations. Professional teachers, however, might not want to admit that their schools are not as successful at achieving an LGBT-inclusive “ethos”, causing them to “bend the truth” a little. This explanation may be speculative, but it draws from the theories on limitations of questionnaires, as identified in the methodology of the study. One interview agreed, suggesting that post-primary schools are currently making more of an effort to be LGBT-inclusive than primary schools. Nevertheless, data from another interview recommended that primary schools should integrate LGBT issues into the school day, in order to make being LGBT more “normal”. Therefore, the data suggest that it is unclear as to how well primary schools in Northern Ireland are promoting inclusive environments, but that there are also ways for schools to improve how they do this.

Furthermore, the data suggest that generally, professional teachers and student teachers alike feel very under-supported by the curriculum in approaching LGBT issues with their pupils. This correlates with the findings of the review of literature, which discovered that there is very little guidance offered by CCEA to primary schools for specifically addressing LGBT issues in the classroom. This is a concerning observation, because, as the interview with *THRIVE SWPA* mentioned, it is important for schools to have a curriculum with LGBT elements in it, in order to create LGBT-inclusive environments. Moreover, as one interview highlights, primary schools look to CCEA for support and guidance in approaching all elements of the curriculum. Therefore, the lack of curricular support experienced by teachers is worrying, considering its potential impact on the inclusivity of the primary school environment.

#### *Pedagogical Approaches to Exploring LGBT Issues*

The data collected in response to this aspect of the study, as summarised in Figure 4, aim to offer reflection on current pedagogical practice in Northern Ireland with regards to exploring LGBT issues with

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primary-aged pupils. They also seek to give guidance and recommendations on potential strategies which teachers could employ to improve their approaches to exploring such issues.

**Table 4.**

<b>Professional teacher questionnaire</b>	<p>62% of respondents admitted to teaching the PDMU strand of the curriculum on a weekly basis, with 15% on a monthly basis and 23% less frequently.</p> <p>54% of respondents admitted to never exploring LGBT issues with their pupils, with 38% doing so less frequently and 8% on a monthly basis.</p> <p>On average, respondents were neither comfortable nor uncomfortable exploring LGBT issues with their pupils.</p> <p>On average, respondents somewhat agreed that LGBT issues should be taught in primary schools.</p>
<b>Final year student teacher questionnaire</b>	<p>All respondents admitted to teaching the PDMU strand of the curriculum at least five times, with one third having taught it 5-10 times, one third 10-20 times and one third 20+ times.</p> <p>All respondents admitted to having never taught about LGBT issues in their classes during their blocks of School Experience</p> <p>On average, respondents were somewhat uncomfortable with approaching LGBT issues with pupils</p> <p>On average, respondents somewhat agreed that LGBT issues should be taught in the classroom.</p>
<b>Interview with the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland</b>	<p>Interviewee cited 2 examples of good practice displayed by post-primary schools in Northern Ireland for exploring LGBT issues, including Hazelwood Integrated School in Belfast, which has an LGBT support group.</p> <p>Interviewee stated that it is CCEA’s responsibility to administer guidance to teachers on approaches to exploring LGBT issues in the classroom.</p> <p>Interviewee warned that primary schools in the Catholic Maintained sector must adhere to the ethos and values of the Roman Catholic Church, which may affect how well schools can explore LGBT issues.</p>
<b>Interview with Cara-Friend</b>	<p>Interviewee highlighted that good practice for exploring LGBT issues in Northern Ireland was displayed only by post-primary schools. Examples included schools with “Gay-Straight Alliances”, which integrate all kinds of students, in order to offer support and normalise being LGBT.</p> <p>Interviewee suggested a good resource for primary schools would be guidance on how to set up such a group i.e. a “toolkit”.</p> <p>Interviewee stated that schools should aim to be proactive in preparing students for a transgender student’s return to the class, post-transition.</p> <p>Interviewee suggested that schools should be proactive in training all of their staff in being more inclusive and sensitive to LGBT pupils’ needs.</p> <p>Interviewee recommended that primary schools seek support from LGBT youth organisations in Northern Ireland for help with staff training and facilitating sessions with pupils.</p> <p>Interviewee stated that lesson plans that explore LGBT issues would be beneficial for teachers in this aspect of education.</p> <p>Interviewee recommended a “comprehensive sign-posting tool” for teachers and pupils which tells them which organisations in their areas are available for support and guidance on various LGBT-related issues.</p>

<p><b>Interview with THRIVE SWPA</b></p>	<p>Interviewee recommended using story books featuring gay or lesbian characters as an effective teaching tool for primary-aged pupils.</p> <p>Interviewee recommended finding ways to explain that “some families have two mommies or two daddies”, particularly on Mother’s Day and Father’s Day.</p> <p>Interviewee warned teachers to not be aggressive in their approaches to LGBT issues, but to take a “subtle” approach, in order to “normalise” being LGBT.</p> <p>Interviewee recommended that teachers be prepared to answer pupils’ questions about LGBT issues.</p> <p>Interviewee highlighted the importance of seeking the school administration’s approval before exploring LGBT issues, in order to avoid a “backlash”.</p> <p>Interviewee highlighted good practice as schools setting up “Gay-Straight Alliances”, in order to reduce homophobic bullying.</p>
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Evidently, exploring LGBT issues in the classroom is not a priority for primary school teachers, with the majority of professionals surveyed having never attempted to do it, and all of the student teachers surveyed admitting the same fact. However, the majority of these respondents reported to teaching the PDMU strand of the curriculum regularly. Therefore, it is not the case that teachers are not devoting enough time to the strand of the curriculum which should involve LGBT issues, but that they are specifically not teaching about LGBT issues. This data seems to exemplify a previous theory, which suggested that primary school teachers do not show adequate concern for their LGBT students. This may be due to the levels of discomfort described by the teachers or due to the lack of support they reported previously. It is evident that this avoidance of teaching LGBT issues is not due to any prejudice because, in general, the primary teachers agree that LGBT issues should be taught. Therefore, the data seem to suggest that primary teachers are open to teaching LGBT issues, but are uncomfortable doing so, possibly due to the lack of support or guidance they are receiving.

Thus, the recommendations for pedagogical approaches made by the interviewees should prove to be helpful for these teachers. Their collective guidance shows a clear appreciation for “Gay-Straight Alliances”, as well as concrete curricular resources as aids to teaching LGBT issues and responding to LGBT issues which arise in the schools. There is also an emphasis on preparation, including the use of lesson plans, “toolkits”, and consultations with school administrations, which indicates that teachers should be adequately prepared to explore LGBT issues in their classrooms. This planning should help alleviate some of the apprehension felt by teachers when exploring LGBT issues with their pupils. However, the data also seem to support the idea that these issues need to be taught in a “subtle” way, in order to “normalise” the concept of being LGBT. Overall, the data recommend a natural, but well prepared approach, which makes effective use of a range of resources, including other outside organisations. Potentially, if more primary teachers used this kind of approach, exploring LGBT issues in their classrooms could provide rich learning experiences for their pupils, and the level of discomfort experienced by the teachers could be decreased.

### Discussion and Conclusions

This study began by asking four simple research questions, with the aim to eventually offer some meaningful answers. Those four questions were:

1. What are the experiences of LGBT people (including young people) in Northern Ireland?
2. What are primary school teachers’ attitudes towards and experiences of exploring LGBT issues in the classroom in Northern Ireland?

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3. What provisions are being made to facilitate the teaching of LGBT issues in primary schools in Northern Ireland by the primary curriculum?
4. What can we learn from the approaches being used by schools in other education systems about exploring LGBT issues, as well as from the perspectives of other relevant organisations, and how can we allow these to inform our own approach as primary educators in Northern Ireland?
5. Through the process of critically assessing the literature regarding these questions, four key themes began to emerge. Those four themes were:
  - Experiences of LGBT people in Northern Ireland
  - Homophobic bullying
  - Inclusive school environments and support from the curriculum
  - Pedagogical approaches to exploring LGBT issues

The information acquired through reviewing this literature attempted to answer some of the original research questions that had been posed. However, due to gaps in current, relevant and available research, it became clear that further research was required, in order to offer more specific and meaningful answers to the research questions. Therefore, through thoughtful and informed consideration of the issues involved and the questions being asked, suitable primary research methods were decided upon. The methodology used was a “mixed-methods” approach, utilising the strengths of both quantitative data, in the form of questionnaires, and qualitative data, in the form of semi-structured interviews. The aim was to effectively use these methods to add more data to the information and literature already available. This data could then be compared and contrasted, in order to offer more substantial answers.

Moreover, from the outset of this study, it was intended that, informed by analysis of the literature and primary data collected, a resource pack would be produced. This pack, entitled *Embracing the Rainbow*, would act as a support to primary school teachers in Northern Ireland for exploring LGBT issues with their pupils. Therefore, the following discussion of the conclusions of the study intend to answer the original questions, in order to build and structure the resource pack.

*1. What are the experiences of LGBT people (including young people) in Northern Ireland?*

The literature indicated that although the experiences of LGBT young people in Northern Ireland are becoming increasingly positive, there are still many challenges for them to face. These difficulties include increased exposure to discrimination and prejudice from peers, family and the public, as a result of their increasing visibility in society. The primary data collected supported this, by showing that professional and student teachers had suspected having at least one LGBT pupil in their classes during their careers. It also agreed that fear, the perceived negative opinions of the general public and LGBT young people’s self-perception were profound obstacles that LGBT pupils have to face in school. This can often result in LGBT pupils “self-excluding” themselves from their peers in school, perpetuating their isolation. Furthermore, it was claimed that the climate in Northern Ireland for LGBT people, young and old, was much less conducive for their prosperity and happiness, compared to the climate in other countries. Homophobic bullying was also highlighted as a major issue by both the literature and primary research. However, the reporting of witnessed homophobic bullying in schools by the literature contrasted the experiences of teachers in the primary research. This indicates that teachers need to be more vigilant of homophobic bullying in their schools, and need to improve their standards and strategies when addressing incidents in schools.

These conclusions should therefore inform the resource pack to be produced. They mainly do this by providing a rationale for the resource in the first place. It is evident that there is an increased awareness of LGBT young people in primary education in Northern Ireland and that these young people need more support. The purpose of this resource pack should therefore be to promote the rights of young people who identify as LGBT. It should also respond to the challenges these young people face by including activities that help LGBT young people to feel integral, equal and welcomed in our society and schools. The issue of homophobic bullying must be addressed in the resource, as the single greatest threat to LGBT young people. It should therefore offer guidance to teachers for addressing this form of bullying and provide activities that begin to address the root causes of homophobic bullying.

*2. What are primary school teachers' attitudes towards and experiences of exploring LGBT issues in the classroom in Northern Ireland?*

The information acquired from the literature combined with the data from the primary research concluded that primary teachers in Northern Ireland do not regularly teach about LGBT issues with their pupils. One explanation revealed that generally, teachers find it uncomfortable to approach these issues for various reasons, which makes them reluctant to attempt to do so. However, they expressed an appreciation of the importance of teaching LGBT issues. This indicates that primary teachers in Northern Ireland wish to explore this aspect of education more, but are apprehensive as to how to approach it. The intended resource pack should therefore offer support for teachers in the form of contacts to outside organisations, which could help to alleviate their concerns with exploring LGBT issues.

*3. What provisions are being made to facilitate the teaching of LGBT issues in primary schools in Northern Ireland by schools and by the primary curriculum?*

The findings of the review of literature revealed that CCEA offer very minimal curricular guidance or support for primary teachers in exploring LGBT issues in their classrooms. The primary data supported this by demonstrating that most teachers feel under-supported by the curriculum to teach about LGBT issues. The issue of LGBT-inclusive environments in schools also became prominent. The general consensus was that LGBT pupils found that primary schools in Northern Ireland are not promoting such environments as well as their post-primary counter-parts. However, teachers disagreed, stating that their schools did foster an inclusive ethos. Nevertheless, these environments must seek to "normalise" being LGBT, while also tackling homophobic prejudices.

This means that the resource pack should help teachers to see the primary school environment through the eyes of an LGBT pupil, but should also include guidance on how to help other pupils see being LGBT as "normal".

*4. What can we learn from the approaches being used by schools in other education systems about exploring LGBT issues, as well as from the perspectives of other relevant organisations, and how can we allow these to inform our own approach as primary educators in Northern Ireland?*

The literature and primary research showed that there is some very effective practice happening in other parts of the world and in other education sectors in Northern Ireland, with regards to teaching about LGBT issues. Across the world, and indeed in some post-primary schools in Northern Ireland, there is a strong emphasis on "Gay-Straight Alliances", as a means to support and integrate LGBT pupils with other pupils, as well as efforts to move from approaches that merely help LGBT pupils to survive, to helping them thrive. Other key teaching approaches recommended by LGBT youth advocates include effective preparation in the form of lesson plans, "toolkits", and consultations with school administrations. Recommendations also include a "comprehensive signposting tool", the use of story and literacy and a "subtle", rather than "aggressive" approach.

Therefore, these conclusions recommend that the resource pack to be produced should offer guidance to teachers on how to set up a “Gay-Straight Alliance” in their schools. It should also include a sequence of age-appropriate lesson plans which begin to actually explore LGBT issues with pupils in a subtle way. Exploring these issues would be beneficial for both Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 pupils. However, teachers could face greater challenges with exploring this content with the younger age group, due to other teachers’ and parents’ potential concerns. There should therefore be planning documents for communication with school administrations and parents, as well as a list which signposts teachers to other local organisations which can offer support to them as they explore LGBT issues. Finally, it should make effective use of story through books and/or digital media, in order to normalise being LGBT.

Thus, it is evident that the original research questions of this study have been answered thoroughly and by a diverse range of sources. The answers have offered insight into the experiences of LGBT (young) people living in Northern Ireland, into primary teachers’ attitudes toward and experiences of exploring LGBT issues in the classroom in Northern Ireland, into the provisions being made to facilitate the teaching of LGBT issues in primary schools in Northern Ireland by schools and by the primary curriculum, and into what we can learn about improving our approaches to exploring LGBT issues with primary pupils from international and local practices. To summarise the current picture for LGBT pupils in primary schools in Northern Ireland, “we are on an upward and onward trajectory, but have a lot of work still to do”.

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