LGBT Inclusion in the Early Years

Introduction

2018 marked the thirty-year anniversary of the controversial Section 28 of the Local Government Act (1988) which banned the "promotion" of homosexuality as a family relationship in local authorities and schools. Homosexuality is used to describe "someone who has an emotional romantic and/or sexual orientation towards someone of the same gender" (Stonewall, 2018:1). The act was prompted by the book "Jenny lives with Eric and Martin", a story about a girl's life with her two dads. The book sparked controversy as some believed that it could transform all children into homosexuals (Stonewall, 2018).

This act led to Local Authorities and schools banning materials which displayed lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) relationships, as well as stopping the discussions of LGBT topics in fear of government action being taken upon them (Moran, 2001).

Since the act was abolished in 2003 we have seen some improvement in LGBT visibility in Education, however 45% of children are still being bullied because of issues surrounding LGBT (Stonewall, 2017:6) The Department of Education recently stated that by 2020 'relationship education' will be statutory for all Primary Schools in England, this new guidance states that LGBT content is fully integrated into their teaching (Department for Education, 2019). These are positive changes for the estimated 20,000 young people in Britain who are part of a family that includes same-sex parents (Rea, 2017:3), however some of these children will be accessing

Early Years Education where currently there is no specific guidance to support the inclusion of the LGBT community.

All Early Years settings in the UK follow the Statutory Framework for the 'Early Years Foundation Stage: **EYFS**' (Department for Education, 2017). The EYFS states that all Early Years providers must ensure that children learn and develop well, as well as valuing all people (Department for Education, 2017:5). The EYFS has an emphasis on supporting children to develop a sense of themselves and others, as well as learning about differences in the world around them (Department for Education, 2017).

Chapman (2013) reports that homophobic and transphobic bullying starts at a young age, suggesting that Early Years settings have a responsibility to teach children about LGBT diversity and provide an environment where LGBT equality is celebrated in order to prevent future prejudice.

A study which explored the link between how a lack of empathy can predict bullying behaviour, found that adolescents whose empathic responses were low were more likely to be involved with the bullying of others (Gina et al, 2007). Empathy can be described as our ability to recognise, understand and respond to other people's emotions appropriately (Wang & Wang, 2015). Hoffman (1984) suggests there are four stages of empathy, as children develop through these stages they become able to understand that others may have different feelings and views as well as recognising and responding to a wide range of feelings such as happiness and sadness. Wang & Wang (2015) feel that empathy plays a motivational influence on our prosocial behaviours, such as helping others, sharing and comforting.

This information suggests that Early Years practitioners have the opportunity to support children to develop empathy in order to reduce bullying. Helping children to develop a sense of self and of others strengthens their ability to empathise with others (Cress & Holm, 2000).

Cress & Holm (2000) suggest that children's literature can assist in the development of empathy as it helps children to understand themselves and others. Children's literature can help us share examples of how we may have similarities and differences to others which develops children's understanding and supports empathy (Kurtts & Gavigan, 2008). Helping children to understand others, supports the celebration of diversity and combats characteristics of heteronormativity (Lester, 2014).

Valuing LGBT diversity through sharing quality LGBT inclusive literature helps to expand a child's awareness of the world around them (Sapp, 2010). Ghosn (2002:176) describes literature as a change agent that helps to "eradicate prejudice by fostering empathy". Exploring different topics through the sharing of stories gives children the opportunity to listen and ask questions, developing an exchange which allows the child to experience and begin to understand other people's values and beliefs (Mankiw & Janis, 2013).

This paper summarises research findings exploring multiple perspectives from Early Years practitioners with regards to current knowledge surrounding LGBT awareness in the Early Years, current levels of inclusion and practitioners' understanding of how reading LGBT inclusive literature to young children can promote inclusion and prevent prejudice. The intention of my study was to support future change, this involved developing practitioner knowledge by sharing

information and research linked to LGBT awareness, as well as sharing tips on how to promote LGBT inclusion in the Early Years.

Methodology and Ethics

This study is framed under an interpretivist paradigm, this enabled me to explore my topic through the responses of others, in order to gain an understanding of their chosen topic rather than searching for one defined answer (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). As an Early Years Practitioner I felt I had identified gaps in regards to LGBT inclusion and wanted to support change. An action research method was used in this study as it allowed me to explore practitioners' thinking and current practice, reflect on possible reasons why and provide implications for the future to support LGBT inclusion.

Overall, nineteen research participants were involved in my study. The participants were made up of fifteen Early Years Practitioners, three Teachers and one Teaching Assistant, all working with children aged birth to seven years. Purposeful sampling was used in order to select this group as they offered rich information regarding LGBT issues in Early Years as they are part of the work force (Patton, 2015).

Qualitative data was collected from a series of semi-structured interviews, focusing on participants' responses following a series of open-ended questions. Each question was devised to seek out participants' current knowledge and thoughts surrounding the topic (Denscombe, 2010). In order to support future change once participants were interviewed, they were then given clear factual information regarding the focus of each question.

Additionally, I kept a journal throughout the process where I wrote down thoughts and feelings which were evoked during my study. McLaughlin (2003) argues that emotions that are aroused during research should be examined in order to explore their possible meaning to create new knowledge and drive change.

Open coding was used as a method of analysis of my findings which involved breaking down the data and identifying similarities and differences (Corbin & Stauss, 1990).

There are many ethical considerations involved in undertaking practitioner action research. Ethics can be described as the study of right and wrong which gives us the ability to make choices based on our values (The British Association of Early Childhood Education, 2011). Ethical approval was gained by the University of Hertfordshire prior to taking part in this study.

My interpretation of ethics in relation to this study, were the actions I took, which I felt to be right, based on my own moral compass. I chose to support my ethical choices by using the European Early Education Research Association (EECERA) 'Ethical code for early childhood researchers' document (Bertram et al, 2015), which is a set of guidelines and principles set out to support early childhood researchers with their ethical choices. As my study involved analysing practitioners' responses on a potentially sensitive subject, I felt that it was important to send participants information outlining the reasons for my study before they made the decision to take part. Participants were also sent a participant information sheet which explained how their information would be used as well as informing them that participation in the study was voluntary and by taking part they were giving 'informed consent' as they were made aware of my full intentions (Brotherton, et el, 2010). Participants were also informed that

they could withdraw from the study at any time. Once participants agreed to take part, written consent was obtained and they were sent the list of questions I would be asking in my study, I did this to ensure my research was transparent and gave practitioners time to think about their responses with the hope of gaining richer data (Morehouse, 2011). Additionally, participants in my study were given the opportunity to discuss their responses following the interview. They were given time to reflect on their view points, providing them with an opportunity to comment further or give more clarity to their answers. Stake (1995) describes this process as 'member checking' which allows your work to be fully transparent. Being transparent enabled me to gain a richer depiction of practitioner knowledge.

Findings and Analysis

My research findings will be presented in the form of three main themes, each theme is the result of breaking down my findings in order to find similarities and differences. Each theme will be analysed using literature to explore what this may mean for LGBT inclusion and the presence of LGBT inclusive literature in Early Years settings.

Throughout my analysis I will be including participants' own words, these will be used to ensure their voices are heard in order to critically reflect on what was said (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012).

Additionally, my own 'personal voice' which came from the method of journaling will be included throughout, including thoughts and questions which occurred during the process.

The three main themes found were; 'Practitioners' values in practice', 'Fear of parent pushback' and 'Unspoken words'.

Practitioners values in practice

Espoused theory describes what views, values and knowledge a person has, which their behaviours are based on (Argyris & Schön, 1974).

In my study practitioners' espoused theory was founded in their belief that they had created an inclusive environment for all, demonstrating that they valued inclusive practice. Throughout the process of interview practitioners used phrases like *"We are inclusive of everyone" and "We include everybody".* However, when prompted to share what they did to ensure LGBT inclusion practitioners gave the following answers; *"Nothing"* and *"I don't think we have any resources".* This demonstrates that although practitioners perceived that they were inclusive settings, in practice the majority of practitioners could not give any examples of this. Another key finding was that when asked the benefits of sharing LGBT inclusive literature all nineteen shared positive examples. However, returning to their responses very few had any books that were inclusive to the LGBT community. This demonstrates that practitioners were aware of benefits of sharing LGBT inclusive literature but many did not put this into practice. Argyris & Schön (1974) call this 'Theory in use' which is used to describe what a person actually does, which is

not always in alignment with their 'Espoused Theory'. Under 'Theory in use' a person's actions can become counterproductive, moving from what they intended to do and what the unintended outcome was, in this case not creating an LGBT inclusive environment (Argyris & Schön, 1974).

Practitioners' actions could have been due to the lack of LGBT awareness in the Early Years and the lack of training to highlight the importance of LGBT inclusion. In order to develop practice, practitioners need to access new learning and internalise relevant knowledge (Borko, 2004). Linking this to Bandura's theory of self-efficacy (1993) which is defined as a person's belief system which stems from past experiences when a person has mastered a task through learning, due to a lack of training practitioners are not being given the opportunity to master their knowledge about LGBT issues. As self-efficacy (Bandura, 1993) motivates how people behave, the result of lack of training could have resulted in practitioners not knowing the full benefits of LGBT inclusion, directly affecting their motivations as they may not see a reason to champion LGBT inclusion.

The lack of LGBT inclusion seen in this study potentially impacts on a child's opportunity to develop an understanding about the LGBT community, as well as impacting on the visibility and celebration of LGBT families who attend settings. Additionally, the lack of LGBT inclusive literature potentially reduces a child's ability to develop empathy towards the LGBT community. Current statistics show that 45% pupils in education are bullied in regards to LGBT matters, this highlights that the inclusion of LGBT inclusive literature in settings needs to be more prominent to help tackle this issue (Stonewall, 2017).

Fear of parent pushback

When practitioners were asked what challenges could impact on their ability to create an LGBT inclusive environment, the main response was the fear of parents challenging them on this matter.

These fears were based on two main reasons, the first was that practitioners felt parents would challenge them because they may not want their child to learn about the LGBT community. They stated this may result from parents having a *"lack of understanding on why LGBT inclusion is important"* or that they *"may be against it".*

The second reason given was that parents religious beliefs would cause pushback. Practitioners reported a high number of families in their settings from the Pakistani community who follow an Islamic religion. The following comments were made in relation to this; *"LGBT is not truly accepted within their religion"* and *"I think parents of faith wouldn't want us to teach their children about LGBT".*

Fear is brought on by the belief that you may be subjected to impending danger or harm (Maddux & Rogers, 1983). In this case practitioners' fears stem from a belief that they would be challenged by parents. Rogers (1975) felt that fear can drive our behaviour, the theory of 'protective motivation' describes when a person changes their behaviour to reduce the risk of threat. Rogers (1975) believes that if a person's behaviour has reduced the risk of threat then that person is more likely to mimic this behaviour again. Linking this to my study the lack of

visibility of LGBT inclusion in the practitioners' settings will be more likely to continue as they are less likely to be subjected to the threat of challenge.

A later revised version of this theory stated that past experiences and observational learning may impact a person's behaviour (Maddux and Rogers 1983). However, when analysing my results, I found that only two people had previous negative experience regarding LGBT inclusion in a setting. One practitioner had been stopped from changing nappies because she identified as a lesbian due to a parental complaint and the other had received a parental complaint after putting up a picture of an LGBT family on a display. This posed the question "what had made the practitioners so fearful of parent's responses?". The theory of 'fear appeal' which is defined as the messages that we hear, that provoke potential danger, could be an answer (Tannenbaum et al, 2015). Fear appeal normally appears in politics and advertising messages with the intention to promote fear in order to reduce potential "risky" attitudes and behaviours (Tannenbaum et al, 2015:1178). With headlines such as; "Teacher suspended for educating children about LGBT" (Jones, 2017) and "Teachers accused of 'BRAINWASHING' children with lessons on homosexuality" (Oilphant, 2016), practitioners are forced to believe that parents are against LGBT inclusion justifying their fear.

Additionally, many believe that religions deem homosexuality as a sin (Wood, 2014). In many Islamic states there is little in place to keep the LGBT community safe, with many facing

imprisonment or the death penalty (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex

Association, 2017). This may support practitioners' belief that their families with an Islamic faith

would challenge LGBT inclusive practice due to historical negative beliefs about the LGBT

community.

The fear that practitioners' feel may potentially result in them not including LGBT inclusive

resources in their practice. Without LGBT inclusive resources such as books, and practitioners

who celebrate LGBT diversity children are missing an opportunity to develop their

understanding. Gaertner & Dovidio (2000) states that without shared values, in this case a

setting with an ethos around inclusion including the LGBT community, children are more likely

to develop prejudice.

Unspoken words

During the interview process I stopped to reflect on the responses I had been given. Each

participant had shared they were inclusive practitioners and were able to tell me what the

benefits of LGBT visibility were in regards to reading LGBT inclusive literature.

However, when asked to back up these views most were unable to give me any examples of

this in practice.

I had found out that staff were impacted by a lack of resources in their settings, limited training

and polices which fail to address LGBT inclusion directly as well as the fear of parent pushback.

However, my practice wisdom as a reflective practitioner was telling me that there was

something that practitioners were not saying.

When asked to identify their understanding of the term LGBT, four participants either said they

did not know or asked for clarification. Upon being told the answer, each of them said they did

know what it meant and when asked why they did not offer the answer they couldn't give any

reasons. During interviews I also felt that some participants were nervous when answering this

question, taking long pauses in between their answers or using non-lexical utterances such as;

"erm", "mmm". I asked myself 'why did participants knowingly give false answers or appear

nervous?'. One reason may be because LGBT is still deemed a sensitive topic, the meaning of

these personal identities are still surrounded by stigma today (Teliti, 2015).

Stigma is used to describe when a person or group is deemed less favorable, leading to negative

beliefs surrounding this person and possible discrimination (Goffman, 2009).

In the past these stigmatised groups were either accepted or rejected by people in society

(Goffman, 2009). However, new research suggests that there is an 'in-between' group where

people are uncertain, hesitant or behave socially awkwardly when discussing people or groups

that are stigmatised (Orne, 2013). A study carried out by Nelson (2015) found that teachers feel

anxious and hesitant about teaching LGBT content as they still deemed it as a private matter.

With this in mind, if a child was to ask a question to a practitioner they could potentially receive

a hesitant response. Children have an innate drive to learn about the world around them, as

they do this they form categories linked to different learning experiences, in this case the child

may categorise LGBT as a topic that is bad and should not be discussed (Bigler & Liben, 2007).

Asking questions helps to normalise aspects of identity that are different than your own,

without these opportunities children as young as three years old can develop negative bias

(Dweck, 2009). This may lead to children communicating negative beliefs, bullying or excluding

LGBT members of the community (Bigler & Liben, 2007). It may also impact on children who

later go on to identify as a member of the LGBT community, as they may feel unable to talk to

others about this.

Implications and Conclusion

The results of this study have implications for potential positive change in regards to LGBT

inclusion, at a personal and Early Years organisational level.

At a personal level, I have learnt what a positive impact having potentially sensitive discussions

with others can have. Following my study, I have spoken to people involved who shared that

our initial discussions have led to further discussions at staff meetings, in the classroom and

even at home with friends. Learning about the benefits of LGBT inclusion has brought the

matter to their attention and people are taking action to make positive changes.

At an Early Years organisational level, I have learnt that Early Years practitioners need to strengthen their knowledge around LGBT to develop their practice. Additionally, I learnt that there are barriers to LGBT inclusion.

In regards to supporting other Early Years settings, I have taken into consideration that a supportive network such as an LGBT steering group would be a beneficial platform for messages about LGBT inclusion to be shared and cascaded to others. I would also like to make connections with organisations such as Educate and Celebrate (2018) and Pop 'n' Olly (2018) who are already out spreading the message about the importance of LGBT inclusion and providing training to schools and settings. Working together with other settings and organisations could open up a network where we could share good practice and learn from each other. With the abundance of negative messages portrayed by the media, sharing positive messages and good practice may help practitioners feel more confident when making changes to their practice in order to become a more LGBT inclusive setting.

Finally, my research findings have motivated me to want to learn more about what parents really think about their children having access to an LGBT inclusive curriculum. I would also like to explore the topic of religion and LGBT acceptance, particularly in regards to the Islamic faith as many of the families I work with follow this religion. Practitioners in my study felt this was one of the main barriers to creating a LGBT inclusive setting. Learning more about parental and religious views could support myself and settings to learn how to address LGBT inclusion in a way that parents understand and that is sensitive towards religious views.

In conclusion, the results highlighted a gap in LGBT inclusion within the settings involved, this is potentially impacted by barriers including practitioner knowledge, fear of parent pushback. I have learnt that this gap could potentially mean that children are unable to build their understanding of the LGBT community and opportunities are missed to celebrate and include children from LGBT families. Potentially, this may result in children developing negative bias or leave children from the LGBT community feeling isolated.

However, a key finding highlighted that by sharing information with practitioners about LGBT awareness, offering strategies and advice on how to create an LGBT inclusive setting, as well as sharing information about the link between reading LGBT inclusive literature with children and the development of empathy, supported practitioners to make or plan changes to their practice. These results emphasize the importance of developing our knowledge around LGBT inclusion and sharing it with others. In doing so we have the potential to create change, making Early Years settings champions of LGBT inclusion.

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