

Supporting LGBTI pupils: 'It's important a school is ready for anyone'

Schools today are much more receptive to students' gender and sexual orientation, and are places where diversity is celebrated rather than scorned



Actor Sir Ian McKellen speaking at the LGBT drop-in group, Priory School, Hitchin

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It was not long ago that LGBT pupils at the Priory School in Hitchin, Hertfordshire, hid behind a mask of silence. Fellow students used the word “gay” to describe something that was rubbish. Faced with homophobic language, they felt unable to come out in the classroom and kept their true identities secret.

Three years later, dozens of students have come out thanks to a “massive culture shift” in school. Today, diversity and inclusion are celebrated across all aspects of school life: from the setting up of an LGBT drop-in group and appointment of an LGBT student champion, to

changes in the curriculum and the building of gender-neutral toilets and changing rooms. Indeed, the school has established such a reputation for equality it is attracting transgender pupils from neighbouring areas.

Priory now has a resident counsellor and has forged close links with local child and adolescent mental health services. Sixteen staff have also been trained in mental health first aid.

Assistant head Katie Southall has led the transformation. Responsible for student wellbeing, Southall realised that more needed to be done to promote equality and diversity. Surveys of young people who identify as LGBT revealed that many are at high risk of mental health problems.

The 2016 Youth Chances survey, conducted by the charity Metro in collaboration with the University of Greenwich, found that out of the 6,414 respondents aged 16-25 who took part in the survey and identified themselves as LGBT, some 44% said they had considered suicide.

Southall says: “We realised from an annual survey on student wellbeing that lots of students identified as gay or LGBT, but didn’t want to be open about it. We are now in a position where pupils are openly transgender, gay, bi, lesbian or gender questioning. For those who are transgender we have procedures in place for name changes and work together with the young person. That can mean getting people who have transitioned to come in and talk to young people.”

LGBT role models have also visited the school, including actor Sir Ian McKellen, co-founder of LGBT charity Stonewall, who spoke to 35 student members of the weekly LGBT drop-in group. “One sixth-former who is gay said he wished the school had been as open when he was in key stage 3,” Southall says.

Meanwhile Arbury primary school in Cambridge is working hard to promote diversity and has become a beacon of good practice. It has adopted a range of initiatives to stamp out gender stereotypes across the school, from abolishing pink- and blue-coloured name badges for reception children, to having a non-gendered school uniform.

Children are taught to respect difference from the start in reception: through picture books showing different types of families, and talks during circle time highlighting the school’s golden rules. Displays of materials from Stonewall with the slogan: “Different families, same love” are posted around the school, which also celebrates LGBT history month.

Staff are trained to understand how stereotyped views of how boys or girls should behave can prevent them from reaching their potential. Senior teacher Kathy Whiting says the school advises other schools on creating a trans-inclusive environment, including training on the use of inclusive language.

Headteacher Ben Tull says: “It is really important that a school is ready for anyone who walks in. For children at primary level, the more we can do to non-stereotype them the better. We steer away from the binary model.”

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