

# Is a school LGBT club a good idea?

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*Guest post from a teacher who now questions his decision to set up an LGBT club at his school.*

*I am choosing to remain anonymous because I am still a teacher and don't have the strength or energy to withstand the inevitable criticism that will be made about this article. I also do not want the school I worked in or the children I looked after to be identified for obvious reasons. I have decided to write this because I feel it incumbent on me to describe my own experiences as a teacher of gender dysphoric teenagers. I also fear that well-meaning LGBT teachers who don't subscribe to gender identity theory will be affected by the inevitable backlash against the teachers who do. I refer to myself as same-sex attracted, rather than gay, in order to be specific about what this particular aspect of my identity means.*

Before I reflect on my experiences creating and running an LGBT club at school, I want first of all to say that **most** teachers are out of their depth in this area specifically, and mental health generally. The main concern for teachers is (and should be) teaching kids a particular subject, be it history, art or physics. Their job is not (and should not be) counselling them through mental health crises. However any good teacher will unavoidably find themselves dealing with a teenager who is struggling with their mental health. Given we became and remain teachers because on some level we like kids, this can be a challenge. We have no proper training, and yet we are confronted with unstable, hormonal teenagers, who often have no hope of seeing trained professionals for months, if not years. This is the context teachers and schools are currently in, and this is the context in which an LGBT club should be considered.

I believe that many of the teachers who are facilitating these groups are likely of a similar age to me, and therefore experienced the same challenges I faced growing up as a non gender-conforming same-sex attracted kid in the 1990s

and early 2000s. Their decision to set up and run these groups is therefore well-intentioned, but, I now believe, a misreading of what it is the teenagers who attend them need. I also strongly suspect that most teachers, myself included until recently, have little understanding of the path on which gender dysphoric children are now set by social media influencers and their peers.

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In September 2018, I started an “LGBTQIA+ and Allies” after school club at the secondary school in rural England where I then worked. I meant well.

However I now realise that I was projecting my own experiences of being a bullied same-sex attracted teenager growing up in the early 2000s onto a group of teenagers who exist in a fundamentally transformed world. What I needed when I was a gender non-conforming teenager grappling with my sexuality was an adult to say “you are fine as you are”. So this is what I thought the teenagers in my care needed, and this is why I decided to set up the group.

What I didn’t appreciate was that in the time between me being a confused same-sex attracted teenager, and me becoming a teacher 20 years later, the world had moved on dramatically. When I said to the self-harming 13 year-old who regularly cried in my classroom that “you are fine as you are”, I had no idea that I was adding to what this student was already hearing from social media influencers on YouTube, TikTok and Reddit.

All of us are now constantly bombarded with images of gym-obsessed men and hyper-sexualised women. I don’t know a single person my age or younger who hasn’t felt under pressure to make themselves more beautiful or more muscled. For same-sex attracted men and women, who are often non gender-conforming, these pressures are felt all the more intensely. If we as adults find it hard, imagine what this is doing to children, at the confusing age when puberty is hitting and sexual desire starts to develop. To teenagers today, to be their truest happiest selves they are told they need to identify the correct label that best matches how they feel, and then act to bring their bodies in line with this label. For a mentally stable adult, let alone a troubled teenager, this is all but impossible and potentially extremely dangerous.

When I said to this girl, “you are fine as you are”, I meant that she didn’t need to do this. Instead I meant that she was simply herself: the unique, complex, beautiful, messy, embodied mind that each human being is. What I certainly did not mean was “you will be fine when you work out who you are, and when you do, you should start adjusting your body to fit what you think this label or identity requires”.

***This is the process that teenage transition represents: rapidly shifting from one poorly defined label or identity to another, eventually leading to major and potentially irreversible bodily modifications within only a few years.***

Over the next 18 months, I witnessed this 13 year-old girl go through a painful, confusing and largely unsuccessful process of identity and label hopping. I also witnessed this girl’s confusion spread to her friends: by the time I left the school, there were five or six trans-identifying students, most of them girls. I affirmed this process the whole time, something which I now deeply regret.

I am writing this in the hope that an adult still in her life might read this and tell her that she is fine as she is, that breast binders and hormones are not necessary and that someday she will come to see her body as something to be respected and loved, not something to be afraid of and hated.

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When I grew up, the Internet was still in its infancy. Mobile phones were only capable of making and receiving calls and clunky text messages. Pornography was static, and the idea of taking a picture of yourself was seen as something only pathological narcissists would have done. It was also the end of the era when leaving school meant leaving behind the peers you were terrified of, because there was no way for them to communicate with you. I was a miserable teenager, like all teenagers. But I was a miserable teenager who was miserable at home, mostly isolated from other miserable teenagers.

Fast forward to the late 2010s, and the world had become a very different place. Based on what I observed in school, there are two trends that have coalesced to produce the rapid increase in trans-identifying children in this

country. First, all children are now permanently attached to their phones in constant dialogue with each other (rather than their families) through text, clips and emojis through an array of social media platforms. Parents have ceded total control to their children, and have little to no idea of the kind of content to which their children are exposed: easily accessible pornography, unattainable body standards, violence, sexualised music and, worst of all, the constant, incessant gaze of their peers. When a child sits in their bedroom alone with their phone, they are in fact sitting in their bedroom with complete strangers they have met online. This cannot be right.

The second trend that has taken root in the last 20 years is of course the popularisation of gender identity theory. The idea that feelings about who you are are somehow of greater significance than your biological reality has, without me or most people I know noticing, become the overwhelmingly affirmed one. Gender dysphoria is clearly real. But I can't accept that the only solution to this problem is to turn a person, especially children, into a medical patient, requiring regular hormone injections with unclear long term side effects and, potentially, the removal of healthy body parts.

It is only recently, and certainly not when I was teaching at this school, that I have understood the true implications of encouraging a child to choose their gender identity. My well-intentioned desire to save the same-sex attracted, gender non-conforming students from the misery I experienced collided with a relatively unregulated online social space which most of my students had inhabited for years, without their parents knowing.

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When I arrived at the school, I had no intention of starting the group. I have never gone to a Pride parade and have no interest in rainbow politics. I have not felt oppressed, bullied or marginalised for a long time, something for which I am very grateful. So the idea of creating an LGBT club only came up when some of my students disclosed to me that they were being bullied because of their sexuality and that as a result, they were self-harming. Child protection and safeguarding laws required that I immediately alert the school's designated safeguarding office, which I did. We decided it might be a nice idea to have a group where students could come to feel safe and secure. I

also spoke to the parents of one of the self-harming girls, who agreed it was a good idea.

From the outset, I was confronted by a major issue: the kids were already steeped in LGBTQ politics and activism and wanted activities of the group to match this. Twelve year-olds already knew what the rainbow flag represented, particularly the most recent additions of brown, black, pink and light blue, which I only recently learnt was the revised “Progress Flag”. They wanted to talk about protesting and marches. I said no because I felt it wrong to politicise the children, even though the very existence of an LGBT club I now realise is a fundamentally political statement. I’ve subsequently discovered that not only is politicising a child wrong, but it is also illegal.

Regarding the issue of gender identity, my policy was to smile and say “whatever works” because I had no idea what it was or what it meant. I genuinely had no idea what the the QIA+ meant or stood for (I still don’t really), had no interest in “queer theory” (an insult does not an identity make), and Judith Butler’s mind-bending attack on words was something I was fortunate to have no knowledge of. And besides, the kids clearly knew far more than me about these things. No need for a teacher to educate them, when they’re already educated.

Within weeks, a girl who had initially said she was a lesbian started using they/them pronouns and identifying as non-binary. She cut her hair off to look more like a boy. A month later, she said she was now a boy. She changed her name several times. Her identity shifted back and forth. No one, students or teachers, could keep up and everyone was constantly ‘deadnaming’ her, leading to more self-harming. We all said ‘whatever works’ with a supportive smile on our faces. She continued to cut herself, regularly coming to school with her arms in bandages. There were also two effeminate boys (one of whom was also severely anorexic) who started identifying as girls and wearing skirts.

Many teenagers were less mentally unwell, and clearly found the process of discovering which label they should adopt quite entertaining. I had young teenagers explaining to me the meaning of identities I had never heard of, like pansexual (you’re attracted to everyone), demisexual (you like to get to know a person before you have sex with them) and a half dozen others. They talked

about it all as though they were in an exclusive club together. I didn't know how to respond, partly because it felt so inappropriate, but also because I genuinely didn't understand what they were talking about. So I fell back on the line "I don't really care what gender you are; as long as you're happy, then that's good".

I also at this time noticed some behaviour traits in the older trans-identifying girls in the school. What struck me with these girls was how shut down, aggressive and rude they were, even to me, the 'cool gay teacher'. To them, everyone who didn't fully support and "validate" them was a transphobe. They attended the group and sat glowering at me, talking conspiratorially. When I suggested that their attitude was counterproductive and unnecessary, they scowled even more. They were also openly talking about their goal of going to the Tavistock clinic for hormone therapy, and were frustrated that they had to wait until they were old enough to start treatment. Of course this knowledge was passed onto the younger kids. I now realise these were all telltale signs of them having been integrated into online trans culture, which at the time I didn't know existed.

I found myself having to interpret the aggressive and rude behaviour of the gender dysphoric teenagers to the baffled staff at the school. My line was a simple one: I didn't really understand trans issues, but knew that when I was interrogated about my sexuality as a teenager, it distressed me greatly. And I emphasised that the key aim was surely to ensure the girls and boys who said they were trans stopped cutting themselves. If using different pronouns helped, why not?

Throughout this period, I disclosed everything to the school safeguarding officer (who was equally baffled about what was going on) and to the parents of the girls whose identities were shifting so regularly. We all agreed that if it meant they stopped hurting themselves, then so be it. The school had a policy of only using different pronouns if the parent had authorised this, which made sense. The policy failed however as soon as it became clear that pronouns and names could change on an almost weekly basis.

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There are four commonalities that I observed in the kids who started to identify as trans. First, none of them had shown any indication of being confused about their gender to the school or their parents prior to coming to the secondary school. The safeguarding officer and parents that I spoke with confirmed it was a relatively sudden shift that had taken place. No previous record of gender dysphoria existed. Second, none of them had a clear idea of what it was they were transitioning to, and their new identities were unstable for the duration of the time I spent with them. There seemed to be a progression from being gay or lesbian, to non binary, to be a trans boy or trans girl, each stage associated with the 'appropriate' gender conforming hair styles and clothes.

Third, I was concerned about the number of girls and boys who started changing their identities who came from abusive or chaotic families with alcoholic, neglectful or violent parents. Others exhibited clear signs of being mentally disturbed (aside from the cutting) or were recognised as having other neurobiological conditions, such as ADHD or autism. Finally, there were the kids who were clearly just struggling to live up to the hypersexualised body standards now expected of boys and girls, standards that were constantly beamed directly into their phones via social media. The boys and girls who were non-binary or trans-identifying were either effeminate boys or boyish girls and definitely not at the top of the school's social hierarchy.

Clearly there have always been alcoholic, neglectful and violent parents, there has always been a hierarchy of kids in schools based on looks, and there have always been kids who struggle more in adolescence. The difference now is that these ostracised, unhappy kids go on social media platforms where they are given the perfect explanation for their impossibly complex problems: they were born in the wrong body, but that it's possible to change their body to match how they feel. Diagnosis, plan, action...

A final piece of the puzzle were the actions of the LGBT group I invited into the school to talk to the children. I had no idea what I was doing when I started the group and needed help, especially with issues around gender identity. So I contacted a local LGBT group who sent a woman to meet the children one day. I could not believe what I saw and heard happen, and politely declined her offer of future assistance. She stood in the classroom and asked to know if the school was affirming them, if their desired pronouns

were being used, if they felt their parents were doing a good job. She was fierce and angry, and seemed to think it appropriate to encourage this in the kids as well.

Of course, the kids, because they are kids, delighted in the opportunity to chuck the school and their parents under the bus. They described the school as though it were a Soviet-era gulag (it wasn't). She then demanded to know why we didn't have any Pride flags hanging anywhere. I said I didn't think it was appropriate to have political symbols in a school, at which she bristled. Looking back, I realise now that I didn't ask for any safeguarding accreditation or appropriate qualifications. Because she was accompanied by a DBS checked teacher, she was effectively exempt. In fact, on the website it says that one of their main qualifications to speak on these issues was their 'experience of being LGBTQIA+'.

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In reality, the school was fine after about six months of me pestering the pastoral and safeguarding team about the homophobic bullying that was being reported to me. The school made sure to follow up these reports quickly and take them seriously and, at least at school when phones were switched off, incidents had become less common. In retrospect, that is all that was needed: consequences for bullies (of any sort), and an emphasis that all, regardless of sexuality, gender, race or creed, were worthy of respect in the school community. The LGBT club served no obvious purpose: there was no need for "a safe space" because the school as a whole had become a safe space.

I looked after this group for about 18 months. In that time, I witnessed dozens of teenagers shopping around for different sexual and gender identities with each other. Many clearly thought it was a game. Some seemed to find it helpful. For others, it resulted in greater isolation and anxiety. Without meaning to, I was contributing to the confusion they felt about their bodies and, without realising it, was encouraging the belief – widespread on the social media they were accessing – that says removing body parts and taking hormones is a good way to deal with a mental disorder. What might work for gender dysphoric adults who have had time to consider and reflect on the

implications of their decisions might be appropriate, but surely not for unstable children and teenagers.

I simply cannot believe that any teacher – or adult – would in their right mind knowingly encourage a child to think they need surgery or drugs to make themselves feel better about how they look. However when you agree to use pronouns that do not align with a child’s biological sex without question, that is effectively the message being sent to them because that is the message they are hearing from the strangers they meet on social media.

Today I find myself thinking of the girl whose ever-changing identities and names I accepted without question. I just pray that the adults around her saw sense sooner than me, before she started flattening her chest.

<https://www.transgendertrend.com/school-lgbt-club/>