Article

Lessons in Lockdown: Rethinking LGBTQ+ Inclusion in Post-Pandemic English Secondary Schools—Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract

The year 2025 marks the fifth anniversary of the COVID-19 pandemic, a crisis that profoundly disrupted secondary schools in England and intensified existing inequalities, including those experienced by LGBTQ+ students. Through an analysis of teacher interviews and the lens of *intimate citizenship*, this article explores how pandemic-driven changes, such as remote learning, school closures, and 'social bubbles', exposed the precariousness of LGBTQ+ inclusion and embodiment within educational institutions. The research highlights how cisheteronormativity was sustained through symbolic institutional compliance and cisheteronormative fragility, as LGBTQ+ inclusion was deprioritised through the erasure of safe spaces and restrictions on self-expression. While previous research has primarily focused on students' well-being, this article centres the perspectives of teachers to consider what can be learned from their experiences to better support students in future crises. The pandemic revealed critical gaps in inclusion efforts, underscoring the urgent need for proactive strategies that extend beyond individual teacher initiatives or informal, hidden curriculum practices. The findings emphasise that LGBTQ+ visibility and inclusion must be structurally embedded within curricula, school policies, and teacher training and that the emotional and relational labour of inclusion must be institutionally recognised rather than left to individual educators.

Keywords: COVID-19; LGBTQ+; education; teachers; intimate citizenship

1. Introduction

In 1994, at the UNESCO summit in Spain, the UK joined ninety-two other countries in endorsing the 'Principle of Inclusion', committing to the pledge that 'whatever their learning needs, all children would be provided with an equal chance of achieving at school...' (Knowles 2017, p. 16). Effective inclusive practice not only fosters acceptance of all students but also celebrates diversity and enhances overall well-being and learning outcomes. Five years ago, such a pledge was significantly tested as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, impacting more than 1.7 billion learners globally (United Nations 2020).

This article explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on LGBTQ+ inclusion in English secondary schools from the perspective of teachers. Drawing on Ken Plummer's (2003) framework of *intimate citizenship*, the study examines how pandemic-related changes—such as remote learning, school closures, and the introduction of 'social bubbles' exposed the precariousness of LGBTQ+ embodiment within educational institutions. The research highlights how cisheteronormativity was sustained through symbolic institutional compliance and cisheteronormative fragility, as LGBTQ+ inclusion was deprioritised through the erasure of safe spaces and restrictions on self-expression.

1.1. LGBTQ+ Inclusion in Education: Progress and Gaps

The struggle for LGBTQ+ inclusion in UK education has been shaped by a complex historical and political landscape. Section 28, introduced by the Conservative government in 1988, prohibited local authorities from 'promoting homosexuality,' effectively silencing teachers from having any positive discussion regarding same-sex relationships in educational contexts (HLP 2022). Whilst its repeal marked a pivotal step towards formal recognition of LGBTQ+ inclusion, the legacy of Section 28 continues to shape UK school cultures, often through silence and/or uneven enactment of inclusion (Lee 2019).

Subsequent legislation such as the Equality Act (2010) enshrined protections for sexual orientation and gender reassignment under its list of protected characteristics, requiring schools to treat all pupils equitably (DfE 2014, p. 8). This includes compliance with the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED), which mandates the elimination of discrimination, advancement of equality, and fostering of good relations for all students (PSED 2022). Ofsted (2013) has also produced guidance to combat LGBTQ+ phobia, reinforcing schools' obligations under anti-discrimination law.

In July 2018, the UK Government launched its LGBT Action Plan pledging 'to making the UK a country that works for everyone' and recognising that 'LGBT people…make a vital contribution to our culture and to our economy'. The Action plan had over 75 commitments to improving the lives of LGBTQ+ people including banning conversion therapy and extending anti-bullying initiatives in schools. They acknowledge that all LGBTQ+ people should feel 'safe at school…so that they can reach their full potential' (Gov.UK 2018). Most notably, in 2020 (published in 2019 to be taught in September 2020), LGBTQ+ identities became a formal part of the Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) curriculum for the first time in two decades (RSE 2020), signaling a shift toward more structured inclusion. The latest iteration of the RSE (2025) curriculum builds on this by increasing the visibility of LGBTQ+ identities in discussions of violence (RSE 2025). Yet it adopts a markedly ambiguous stance towards non-conforming gender identities. By focusing narrowly on gender reassignment, it fails to adequately acknowledge non-binary and wider gender-diverse experiences, creating uncertainty and inconsistency in practice. In doing so, the guidance complicates the validation of trans and non-binary pupils' embodied identities and limits their access to meaningful conversations about gender diversity. Such ambiguities reflect a wider pattern, as government actions and research have consistently pointed to patchy and symbolic enactment of inclusive practices around diverse gender and sexuality identities (Heck et al. 2016; Stonewall 2017; Caris-Hamer 2024) within education institutions. For instance, Tomlinson-Gray (2022) highlights the limited progress made on the LGBT Action Plan, noting that gay conversion therapy remains legal and there has been a withdrawal of funding for projects around Equality and Diversity in schools, including LGBTQ+ bullying. Whilst the Stonewall (2017) School Report found a decline in anti-LGBTQ+ bullying, 45% of LGBTQ+ pupils still face bullying at school, 30% still report a silence from schools around acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities. However, as scholars argue, these figures should not be read as evidence that bullying is the core issue; rather, they illustrate how structural cisheteronormativity manifests in interpersonal behaviours within schools (Formby 2015; Payne and Smith 2013).

Schools are still overwhelmingly cultures that promote and reproduce cis-gender and heterosexuality as the default identity (Formby 2015; Donovan et al. 2023). Some schools demonstrate a commitment to inclusive LGBTQ+ practices, but other schools adopt a minimalist, compliance-based approach where any inclusion is dependent upon the initiatives of individual educators (Epstein 1994; Ahmed 2012; Stonewall 2017; Caris-Hamer 2026). As a result, some LGBTQ+ students remain marginalised within the education system. Furthermore, while much of the research centres on students' perspectives, less

attention has been paid to how teachers navigate institutional constraints and support, or inhibit, inclusion.

1.2. The Hidden Curriculum and LGBTQ+ Inclusion

Whilst official policies may express commitments to LGBTQ+ inclusion, there is still often an overwhelming culture of heteronormativity within the formal curriculum (Glazzard et al. 2017; Glazzard and Stones 2021). As such the *hidden curriculum* provides a useful lens for understanding how LGBTQ+ inclusion or exclusion is enacted implicitly. The hidden curriculum is defined as the implicit norms, values and assumptions conveyed through everyday educational practices, relationships and organisational structures (Donovan et al. 2023; Azimpour and Khalilzade 2015; Speirs 2021), reflecting the ethos of the school as communicated through its planning and organisation (Epstein 2004).

This hidden curriculum is considered essential for the holistic development of young people (Epstein 2004) and helps shape students' sense of acceptance and belonging, particularly in relation to topics marginalised or omitted from the formal curriculum. The hidden curriculum tends to be heteronormative in nature (Formby 2015). Examples include, when discussing couples, only discussing heterosexual relationships, having uniforms that align with cis-gender binary identities, and staff responses to LGBTQ+ phobia. These examples rely heavily on teachers transmitting specific messages (Youdell 2006) and are influenced by school leadership and organisation cultures (Epstein et al. 2003) to set foundations around acceptance, values of equality, and support for students' wellbeing.

Counter-hegemonic spaces such as LGBTQ+ student clubs and societies often emerge in response to a cisheteronormative culture. While they may appear institutional, they are informal spaces, frequently supported by a teacher (Caris-Hamer 2026). These spaces offer students opportunities for peer support, identity exploration, and community building within a safe space. These initiatives contribute to an embodied experience of inclusion, affirming students' diverse identities within otherwise cisheteronormative cultures (Plummer 2003; Youdell 2006; Brett 2025).

1.3. Cisheteronormative Fragility

The concept of *cisheteronormativity*[1] fragility draws on queer theory, critical race theory and critical pedagogy (Warner 2002) and is inspired by DiAngelo's (2018) notion of white fragility. In this context, cisheteronormative fragility refers to the defensive emotional and institutional reactions that arise when dominant assumptions around gender and sexuality are questioned or disrupted.

Within education, these reactions, that can be both intentional or unintentional, and manifest as discomfort, avoidance, deflection, and silence when LGBTQ+ identities are introduced. Education institutions have, for a long time, been recognised as key sites for the reproduction of cisheteronormative norms and values (Epstein et al. 2003; Brett 2024) and as such any conversations that may disrupt or create uneasiness can be met with ambivalence, deferral, or resistance which contribute to upholding the status quo and discourage open dialogue. Payne and Smith (2013) exemplify cisheteronormative fragility in education by showing how school professionals often depoliticise LGBTQ+ inclusion by framing it through safety or bullying discourses rather than addressing the structural roots of marginalisation. Such strategies prioritise comfort and neutrality over equity and justice, reinforcing institutional silence and conditional support around LGBTQ+ identities (Warner 2002).

1.4. COVID-19 and Its Impact on LGBTQ+ Identities

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented disruption to everyday social interactions and significantly affected educational institutions. National lockdowns, remote

learning, and social distancing policies drastically altered modes of teaching and learning (Education Policy Institute 2020a). In the UK, students and staff experienced two national lockdowns between March 2020 and early 2021, with partial or tier-based restrictions throughout this period (Gov.UK 2022; Timeline 2025).

These disruptions created logistical and emotional challenges. Teachers had to re-design curricula and navigate digital teaching, increasing their initial workload (Reimers 2022), while students faced technological limitations and confined learning environments shared with family members. Some students were still able to access the school buildings to complete their education if their guardians were 'key workers' or if students faced other vulnerabilities. When schools were open, they implemented 'bubbles', usually by year group, to attempt to reduce transmission of any potential virus. This limited student movement, peer interactions, and access to their usual support. Both outdoor and indoor spaces were tightly controlled, and practical lessons were suspended.

Beyond logistical changes, the broader societal impact of COVID-19—illness, bereavement, economic instability, safety, and overall mental health—also shaped the emotional climate of learning (Reimers 2022). While much attention has been paid to how the pandemic affected provisional learning (Thorn and Vincent-Lancrin 2022) and educational equity related to class, race, and gender (Goudeau et al. 2021; Darmody et al. 2021; Jeffreys 2022; Chadderton 2023; Bernard et al. 2024), less research has considered its impact on LGBTQ+ students. The aim is not to suggest that these challenges were more profound than others but to foreground the nuanced issues teachers observed LGBTQ+ students encountering.

It is important to note that schools have historically been spaces of ambivalence for LGBTQ+ students. For some they provide vital spaces of safety and affirmation (Formby 2015; Youdell 2006), while for others they are sites of bullying, silence, or exclusion (Stonewall 2017). This duality has long characterised LGBTQ+ experiences of schooling (Epstein et al. 2003), but became particularly evident during the pandemic, when being away from school simultaneously deprived some students of safe spaces while protecting others from school-based harms (Gill and McQuillan 2022; Just Like Us 2022). Emerging research suggests LGBTQ+ youth experienced disproportionate social, emotional, and health-related challenges during the pandemic (Konnoth 2020; Poteat et al. 2020; Flannery 2024; Meyer 2003). Quarantine with unsupportive or hostile family members negatively impacted wellbeing (Gato et al. 2020; Gattamorta et al. 2022) while other studies noted the nuanced tensions LGBTQ+ young people faced compared to their non-LGBTQ+ peers (Just Like Us 2022; Fish et al. 2020). Although prior research shows that negative home environments can be mitigated by school-based support networks (Scroggs and Vennum 2020), during the pandemic such support was sporadic at best. Digital spaces can offer some affirmation but also carried risks, including harmful interactions and exposure to negative messaging (Craig and McInroy 2014; Boston Children's White Paper 2025; Tanni et al. 2024). While these cultural and digital resources are important, the present article focuses specifically on the perspectives of teachers within school-based contexts.

1.5. Intimate Citizenship Framework

This research uses the framework of intimate citizenship developed by Plummer (2003) to consider how LGBTQ+ embodiment is being reconfigured and negotiated within schools. Intimate citizenship refers to the individuals' rights and recognition concerning 'feelings, relationships. . .access to or not to [diverse] representations, relationships and public spaces' (Liddiard 2019). As mentioned previously, expressions of diverse gender and sexuality have increasingly entered the domain of the education sector, prompting citizenship debates around visibility, affirmations, and morality (Caris-Hamer 2026). Education is central to

these negotiations since it is both a public institution and a site of personal development for young people.

Teachers play a crucial role in mediating intimate citizenship. As educators, they often become gatekeepers and facilitators around LGBTQ+ identities. They, along with senior leaders and the formal curriculum, shape which identities are affirmed or marginalised. The repeal of Section 28 in 2003—the same year Intimate Citizenship (Plummer 2003) was published—is both symbolically and materially significant (Caris-Hamer 2026). It marked the beginning of an ongoing shift in how education might participate in the broader politics of recognition of LGBTQ+ identities in schools. Subsequent legal developments such as the Equality Act (2010), Civil Partnership Act (2004), and the introduction of inclusive RSE guidelines (RSE 2020) collectively signal an expansion of the rights and recognitions afforded to LGBTQ+ individuals, reflecting the emergence of what Plummer would term new intimate citizenships. Yet, these legal reforms do not necessarily translate into the embodiment of students within schools. Plummer's emphasis on the 'blurring of public and private' is especially relevant to this research. During the pandemic, educational practices, traditionally public, were relocated into private, domestic settings through remote learning. This collapse of boundaries introduced new complexities to expressions of LGBTQ+ identity, privacy, and belonging.

1.6. Research Gap

While examining student experiences has been central to much of the research on LGBTQ+ inclusion in education during the pandemic (Just Like Us 2022; Fish et al. 2020; Gato et al. 2020; Flannery 2024), limited attention has been paid to the perspectives of teachers (Forrest and Joy 2021), despite their central role in fostering or hindering LGBTQ+ inclusion. Existing research often comes from outside the UK, where institutional contexts and policy landscapes differ around LGBTQ+ inclusion. Whilst students' perspectives are essential in understanding the impact the pandemic had on their education, little is known about how teachers navigate institutional constraints, or how a crisis such as COVID-19 can expose and/or exacerbate LGBTQ+ equity gaps.

This article addresses these gaps by foregrounding teachers' perspectives on LGBTQ+ inclusion during the COVID-19 pandemic in English secondary schools. In doing so, it contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the intersections between crisis conditions, inclusive practices that shape the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ students, and those tasked with supporting them.

2. Materials and Methods

The original aim of this research was to explore, from the perspective of teachers, the barriers to LGBTQ+ inclusion in the secondary education sector in England. More specifically, the research examined the processes of *usualisation*—the normalising of non-normative identities—(Sanders 2025) and the possibilities for disruption and resistance, or not, to dominant binary norms underpinning cis-normative and heteronormative frameworks within educational institutions (Butler 2004; McDonald 2017).

The research was situated within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, a historically significant period that presented a unique opportunity to explore how the disruption of conventional schooling affected inclusion, particularly of LGBTQ+ identities, as teaching and other school-based activities shifted from face-to-face delivery to online platforms. A central theme in the interviews was how this shift impacted LGBTQ+ inclusion and how teachers navigated and embodied inclusive practices during this time of upheaval.

Framed by queer theory and the concept of intimate citizenship, which positions data collection as both a political and moral act (Kong et al. 2003), the research aimed to

centre lived experiences and amplify voices that may otherwise remain marginalised. This approach sought to contribute to an emergent, more inclusive vision of citizenship within education, one that affirms diverse identities and ways of being.

2.1. Participants and Sampling

A total of forty-in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted online (adhering to national policies during COVID) with secondary school (some with a sixth form attached to the school) teachers in England. Half the participants identified as male and half as female, ranging in age from 27 to 50. All had a minimum of twelve months teaching experience and were currently employed in the 11–19 education sector, teaching at least one subject at Key Stage 3 or 4. England was chosen as the sole context due to its distinct national curriculum, which differs from those in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. Including participants from the other UK nations would have introduced curriculum-based variability that could have complicated the analysis.

Sampling combined convenience and snowball techniques. Participants were recruited through professional contacts from my previous role as a teacher and via targeted advertisements on social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook. Facebook groups related to teaching subjects or educational unions proved particularly effective in reaching prospective participants. Weekly posts were made until the target sample of forty was achieved. The participants represented a range of educational settings, including state-maintained academies, free schools, pupil referral units (PRUs), and independent schools. Nine teachers worked in schools with a religious affiliation (Catholic, Church of England, and Jewish), and seven taught in single-sex schools. The participants held a variety of professional roles: two were members of senior leadership teams (assistant principals), fourteen were middle leaders (including roles such as subject/faculty lead, SENCo or Head of Year), and the remaining twenty-four were classroom teachers. Fifteen also self-identified or were appointed as LGBTQ+ lead representatives in their institutions. Participants taught a range of Humanities, Science and Social Science subjects.

2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

To capture changes over time and encourage deeper reflection, each participant was interviewed twice: once during the autumn term (September–December 2020) and again during the summer term (June–August 2021), thus covering a full academic year. Drawing on queer theory's emphasis on challenging normative assumptions (Sedgwick 1990), the decision to conduct follow-up interviews addressed the limitations of one-off interviews, which often capture only a static snapshot of the fluid and sometimes contradictory ways individuals negotiate identity, norms, and embodied practices over time (Ezzy 2010). Follow-up interviews enabled the researcher to revisit and probe earlier themes, and the opening question, 'What were your thoughts from the first interview?', encouraged reflexivity and self-awareness on the part of participants (Caris-Hamer 2025). All interviews were conducted online and audio recorded. This offered several advantages, including cost efficiency and increased flexibility, allowing a broader demographic range of participants to be included.

Transcripts were analysed using systematic thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022) and followed the six-step process outlined by Naeem et al. (2023). The transcripts were read multiple times to identify recurring patterns and concepts. Initial codes were applied manually, and preliminary themes were developed. These themes were then refined through further analysis of the data corpus to establish meaningful categories that captured a range of perspectives and experiences.

The research was informed by feminist and queer methodological traditions that foreground the importance of reflexivity and researcher positionality (Kong et al. 2001). Acknowledging the influence of the researcher's standpoint is particularly vital when investigating identity, inclusion, and marginalisation.

My motivation for undertaking this research was shaped by both professional experience and personal investment, reflecting the understanding that researchers often pursue topics that resonate with their lived identities (Thompson 2015). I am a qualified teacher with many years of experience in the 11–19 sector and was openly gay throughout my teaching career. I recognise that whilst there are specific policies that education institutions must adhere to, the day-to-day processes and strategies for the school will differ between schools and across time due to various contextual variables, and consequently, my positionality emerges as an assemblage constantly in flux. This dual positionality—as both insider and outsider—was acknowledged throughout the research process.

As a former practitioner, my familiarity with the professional language and policy context surrounding inclusion allowed for more natural, rapport-driven conversations with participants. At the same time, my current role as a researcher, having ceased classroom teaching, introduced a necessary critical distance. I consciously adopted a learner's stance, attending carefully to how participants expressed themselves, how I interpreted their narratives, and how power operated within the interview setting (Blaikie and Priest 2019).

3. Findings

Teachers interviewed generally accepted that, as part of the Teaching Standards (2021), schools should be celebrating diversity and ensuring the well-being of *all* students. Teachers emphasised the importance of their role in creating a safe space for students, especially those who are part of the LGBTQ+ community. Teachers acknowledged that schools should be responsible for ensuring an inclusive culture regarding sexuality and gender diversity, in similarity with how inclusivity should focus on ethnicity, class and gender (within the context of schools and education data this means male and female) identities. As discussed, teachers expressed how lesson plans were amended, and schemes of work rearranged to accommodate students learning remotely or in minimal-contact circumstances during the pandemic. Of theoretical significance is that Teaching Standards were not expected to be diluted during this unprecedented event. However, in practice, teachers' experienced barriers in their ability to create and ensure a safe space for inclusion within their institutional context, particularly for LGBTQ+ students.

3.1. LGBTQ+ Inclusion: The Hidden Curriculum

The hidden curriculum, shaped and conveyed by teachers, communicates underlying messages and expectations about which identities are considered acceptable, in this context around gender and sexuality (Speirs 2021). When discussing with teachers the forms of LGBTQ+ inclusion that existed in their schools before the COVID-19 pandemic, some highlighted visual displays showcasing LGBTQ+ identities. For example, Cove mentioned that the science department had a display featuring Alan Turing. Others spoke about encouraging the school library to stock LGBTQ+ inclusive books.

Some teachers also discussed incorporating LGBTQ+ identities into their lesson content, particularly when it aligned with the curriculum. For example, by using LGBTQ+ characters in hypothetical scenarios. Dexter described how in their Health and Social Care classes, they asked students to consider the challenges older LGBTQ+ people might face when entering care homes. Similarly, Ever encouraged students in Design and Technol-

ogy to consider whether a product might appeal to LGBTQ+ communities. These were examples of attempts to enrich the curriculum through the inclusion of diverse content.

Fifteen teachers described having a more formal role as an LGBTQ+ lead, whether self-appointed, appointed by senior leaders, or nominated by students. This often involved running clubs and societies for LGBTQ+ students. River, for example, shared that a non-binary student and their friends had approached him about setting up a group because, as they expressed, 'we don't really... have anywhere we can talk about this kind of stuff.' The Head Teacher had agreed on the condition that a staff member could be found to run it. The students approached River because he is openly gay. These clubs and societies were viewed as 'safe spaces' where LGBTQ+ students (and at times their allies) could discuss LGBTQ+ topics, share knowledge, and offer each other both social and emotional support. Such practices can be understood as enabling forms of intimate citizenship (Plummer 2003), in which recognition, belonging, and relational affirmation are enacted within a school context. As River explained, 'I think it's important that we talk about these things and give the students that kind of role model.'

Avery also emphasised the importance of staff playing an active role in LGBTQ+ inclusion, stating that it is essential to 'empower...students...every interaction, every day...those students [LGBTQ+ students] need to feel and know that they are accepted and important and valued for who they are.' These interventions can be understood as counter-hegemonic practices, disrupting normative school cultures and carving out room for alternative identities and forms of belonging. In addition to student-focused activities, pre-COVID-19 LGBTQ+ inclusion efforts also extended to supporting staff in adopting more inclusive teaching practices. Some LGBTQ+ leads described offering both formal and informal Continuing Professional Development (CPD) sessions, which included discussions on 'queer rights, agendas, [and] terminology,' (Avery) with the broader aim of bringing LGBTQ+ inclusion into 'teachers' consciousness' (Avery).

While all teachers interviewed acknowledged the importance of LGBTQ+ visibility, much of this visibility remained within the domain of the hidden curriculum, included only when individual teachers made the effort to do so. During the pandemic, there were significant changes to LGBTQ+ inclusion within schools. Some teachers pointed to COVID-19 having a negative impact on LGBTQ+ inclusion, whilst others suggested no impact, or a positive impact. The analysis of teachers' interviews identified two main themes, including the symbolic nature of institutional compliance and cisheteronormative fragility.

3.2. Symbolic Nature of Institutional Compliance

3.2.1. The Consequences of COVID-19 for LGBTQ+ Inclusion

Among teachers who were consciously attentive to LGBTQ+ inclusion, either through their active engagement or by identifying as LGBTQ+ themselves, all emphasised the significance of safe spaces within educational settings. These spaces were seen as essential for supporting students who were questioning their identities, as well as for affirming those who had already begun to express them. As Ash reflected,

> *I think for a lot of students, school is much safer space than home. I think a lot of students, for example, use school as a weapon in that they don't always feel comfortable doing it at home and that can be very helpful way of giving students space to explore their own identities...*

Ash considers school as a counter space offering affirmation of students' identity in contrast to potentially unsupportive home environments.

This perception was echoed by others, for example, Jodi described how the Rainbow Alliance group became a space where students could not only gather but also express their LGBTQ+ identity visibly:

> *. . .we're called the Rainbow Alliance. . .there used to be one space that kids could come to and just be openly and often, flamboyantly queer, and they don't get that chance anymore. I am having to do a lot of personal one-to-one meetings with the kids. . .and check they are doing okay and check that they are not having a hard time. . .*

Francis also reflected on their own experiences, emphasizing how such spaces are not just sites for emotional support but also a community of activism:

> *So there was about 30–40 kids that have come to the meeting every lunch and it wouldn't necessarily be like a meeting where they were discussing issues. . .it was generally a safe place for those students to come and immediately talk to me about any issues, so I would talk about any bullying issue to teachers and stuff. . .they have lost that. . .and I'm really hoping it doesn't sort of dismantle the group. . .because it was a group that was getting a bit of headway and. . .we raised like £300 and then we were going to do something with it. . .and I genuinely think that I might have to start from the ground up again.*

For several teachers, the closure of students' safe spaces represented a personal loss for the students they cared about. Teachers described feeling disheartened by the erosion of this structural support, which they felt was vital for students who may not have affirming environments at home.

Morgan highlighted the negative impact of losing spaces that affirm students' LGBTQ+ identities:

> *We've got some people in my school who identify as LGBT who are not accepted for that at home and so school is very much where they're safe and they've essentially had that safe space removed [because of lockdown]. . .It's been the space where they've had things like the club. . .where they've been able to have conversations with people who support them and support their views. . .and identity. . .that's quite a negative effect there.*

Harper extended this concern, reflecting on the longer-term consequences that lockdown has potentially had for LGBTQ+ students:

> *If we think about what six months enforced staying at home has done for teenagers who are LGBTQIA, who are living with people who have no idea how they feel, with little access to friends, emotional support, solitude, serious mental health issues arising, loneliness, isolation, depression, anxiety. I could go on but you kind of get where I'm going with that.*

Together, these examples show how the loss of safe spaces represented not only the withdrawal of pastoral provision but also a denial of students' ability to enact intimate citizenship within schools (Plummer 2003). Harper's comments highlight the wider mental toll in terms of isolation, particularly for students unable to express who they are at home safely. The absence of school-based structures—such as LGBTQ+ groups, regular contact with supporting teachers and peer networks—was seen by teachers as contributing to a heightened sense of vulnerability among LGBTQ+ youth during the pandemic.

Sutton further emphasized this vulnerability, noting how intersectional identities placed some LGBTQ+ young people at heightened risk and likening the situation to public concerns about domestic abuse:

> *In the same way that was all in the news about people suffering domestic violence being trapped in their homes. Well, that's true for lesbian and gay teenagers as well. . .particularly the Muslim boys who might feel that they're gay.*

Sutton emphasises the importance of maintaining a connection between students and trusted adults during this period, especially for those navigating unsupportive or unsafe home dynamics. As they further reflected, 'I know from the people that I was mentoring, the struggles were with explaining to home what was going on and that will now be repressed'.

Other teachers also acknowledged that during lockdown, some students were confined in households where family members openly expressed hostility towards gender and sexuality diversity. Cove shares a case example:

Yeah, there's loads of students who I knew were going. . .in actively homophobic households. . .we've got a trans girl whose mum was really supportive and stuff, using the pronouns and then lockdown happened, and she [mum] stopped using the pronouns for some reason. . .and stopped validating her. . .the trans girl came back [to in person teaching] just really distressed.

Cove not only addresses a shift in parental behaviour but also the emotional and psychological consequences of LGBTQ+ students', and particularly trans students', identities not being affirmed. Many teachers raised concerns about the longer-term impact of these experiences and the need for renewed pastoral care upon returning to school. It is noteworthy that, although participant teachers regarded these experiences as concerning, none interpreted and openly acknowledged them as safeguarding matters.

In addition to well-being, teachers also drew a correlation between inclusion of all kinds and academic success. As Hollis explained regarding a staff training session,

I gave some training to the staff. . .the idea that if young people's wellbeing, who they are, confidence in themselves. . .their self-core is positive, then everything builds from that. Any success can only build up from the core of wellbeing.

Hollis's perspective illustrates the idea that it is likely not sufficient to have LGBTQ+ inclusion as an optional addition, but rather that it should be included as a foundation to both emotional development and academic achievement.

3.2.2. COVID: The Re-Ordering of Priorities

Despite existing statutory frameworks and guidelines promoting inclusion, additional statutory measures introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as those related to school closures, remote learning, and safeguarding (Schools COVID-19 2022), significantly influenced teachers' perceptions of how to uphold inclusive practices across diverse teaching and learning contexts.

Teachers generally reported that the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted progress toward inclusive practice, with one participant noting that it 'torpedoed some of the way we are moving forward with inclusion' (Holis). Many described how inclusion was deprioritised, or 'pushed to the side' (Jodi), as attention shifted to immediate operational concerns, such as transitioning to online teaching, converting practical lessons into theoretical formats, and ensuring the continued delivery of core content. In this context, a strong emphasis was placed on 'driving progress forward' (Jodi) and maintaining a focus on 'exam outcomes' (Kit).

Lux reflected on the pressures educators faced to preserve academic achievement during this period and reflecting specifically on LGBTQ+ inclusion:

There's so much pressure, because it is such an academic school, even though it's a comprehensive, like there's just a lot of academic pressure to do quite well. . . [due to Covid] it's ten times worse than it is normally so obviously that has knock on effects. . .I mean no one cares [about LGBT+ inclusion] because we're all just trying to set up Google classrooms and Google meets so we can teach students. . .no one cares about anything else.

The last comment, 'no one cares about anything else,' demonstrates the demands of remote teaching and the prioritisation of academic outcomes overshadowing inclusion work, with LGBTQ+ issues sidelined as non-essential.

Timber expressed a similar concern, emphasizing that the pressure to sustain academic progress relegated students' identities and wellbeing:

[The focus was] very much around teaching and learning, and just how to drive progress forward. Sadly, it feels like the kids and their personalities, and their personal issues are very much a secondary thing.

Together, Lux and Timber illustrate how the pandemic-era emphasis on academic outcomes came at the expense of attending to students' identities, emotional well-being, and social needs. In addition, the fact that LGBTQ+ identities are viewed as a personal or private matter rather than a systematic issue within education highlights a longstanding tension between the commitment to comply with institutional inclusion and the performative demands of the neoliberal education system.

3.2.3. Hierarchy of Inclusion: Marginalisation of LGBTQ+ Identities

During COVID-19 pandemic, schools largely conceptualised inclusion through an instrumental lens, equating equity with access to material resources such as smart digital devices and internet connectivity. While these positions were necessary and consistent with government policy interventions (Education Policy Institute 2020b), this reflects a narrow understanding of inclusion that privileged socio-economic need while overlooking the relational, embodied, and identity-based experiences of students.

Morgan, alongside other teachers, described the efforts made by their school to ensure students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds could access online educational material:

I've got some pupils, who don't even have a single smartphone at home. So, all the kind of stuff that people have been talking about in terms of online learning, they've not been able to access any of it at all, they've been completely shut off from education.

This highlights how educational inequalities intersect with class and digital access, potentially leaving some LGBTQ+ students doubly disadvantaged.

Other teachers stated that some of their students, who did not have access to smart devices, were sent home printed work packs. Ira noted that their school had invested in Chrome books before the pandemic, which helped students to access online learning. This further demonstrates how inclusion was operationalised as a technical problem of access rather than a holistic approach considering students' affective, social, and identity-related needs.

Some teachers considered more intersectional identities associated with socio-economic class in the form of gender and ethnicity. As Lux states in relation to class and gender,

[COVID-19 impacted] particularly on inclusion between poor and rich students…I mean, I've got pupils, particularly girls who haven't been able to access online learning because they've been looking after younger siblings so parents can work.

Morgan further extended this point by drawing attention to ethnicity as another factor:

…and in terms of ethnicity, statistically, your students that are from different ethnic backgrounds are more likely to be your pupil premium students, more likely to be from deprived homes and so it's a double hit on the community as well.

These accounts underscore how LGBTQ+ inclusion cannot be considered in isolation but must be understood through an intersection lens that recognises overlapping vulnerabilities.

While some teachers demonstrated an awareness of the intersections of gender and ethnicity alongside class, several other teachers described how, following the murder of George Floyd, race and racism were actively addressed during the pandemic (Pearson 2020). Robin recalled a departmental meeting in which a Black colleague shared a personal response to the incident and emphasised how her colleagues should not dissuade discussions around racism and demonstrated ways to open up dialogue.

Other teachers, such as Harper and Avery, noted that their school incorporated Black Lives Matter themes within assemblies and tutorial discussions. Basil highlighted the formation of an anti-racism group during lockdown and Sage encouraged students to engage with their summer academic project using Black Lives Matter as a critical lens. While these discussions often relied on individual teachers' commitment and were not always embedded in the formal curriculum or institutional policy, they did gain institutional visibility and support.

In comparison, LGBTQ+ inclusion remained far less visible and was structurally unsupported; schools selectively engaged with certain forms of marginalisation over others (class and ethnicity over LGBTQ+), Avery summed this up:

> *Queer support is at the bottom of the pile when it comes to inclusion, you know, race is increasingly prioritised, particularly with the Black Lives Matter movement at the moment.*

This comparison demonstrates how schools selectively engaged with certain forms of marginalization over others (ethnicity over LGBTQ+). This is despite the significance gender and sexuality diversity can have within students lived experience and possible related concerns surrounding safe spaces. During the pandemic, the embodiment of diverse sexualities and gender identities were often positioned lower in the hierarchy of inclusion priorities, often remaining embedded in voluntary practices and teacher-led initiatives rather than explicitly addressed through formal curriculum or institutional structures. This hierarchy reflects what queer theory highlights as regulatory power of normativity, where some identities are institutionally validated while others remain peripheral or precarious (Warner 2002; Butler 2004).

Teachers who actively engaged in LGBTQ+ inclusive practice described multiple ways in which such efforts were negatively impacted during the pandemic. A key disruption was the discontinuation or reduction in Personal, Social, Health, and Economic (PSHE) education, including Relationships and Sex Education (RSE), during school closures, which limited opportunities for structured discussions of LGBTQ+ topics. This disruption was reinforced at policy level. Although RSE became statutory from September 2020, schools were permitted to delay full implementation until summer 2021 due to COVID-19 (House of Commons Library 2021; Gov.UK 2025).

In addition, the visibility of LGBTQ+ leads, role models, and active allies diminished significantly due to the shift to online teaching, as well as the reorganisation of schools into socially distanced 'bubbles' upon reopening. These measures, though necessary from a public health perspective, had unintended consequences for inclusion.

Many schools also suspended extracurricular clubs and societies, spaces that often served as crucial safe havens for LGBTQ+ students. These groups, typically held during lunch or after school, not only offered peer support but also contributed to broader visibility through posters, classroom displays, and school-wide events. Their absence erased important forms of everyday affirmation that helped to usualise LGBTQ+ presence within the school environment.

Teachers further reflected on how digital platforms constrained the informal and affective dimensions of school life, particularly in moments when students might disclose personal concerns or explore aspects of their identity. As Emerson noted,

> *I think a lot of disclosure, a lot of children talking, sort of happens when they're walking out the door…then you're kind of on zoom and you are saying 'is everything all right?'…children won't admit to anything…so yeah, I think…there's been pastoral issues that have built up, some of those might be related to gender and sexuality and we've missed them because we've not been there physically with them.*

This absence of informal relational space during remote learning meant that pastoral care, and by extension, the recognition of LGBTQ+ embodiment, was significantly weakened.

Several teachers raised concerns about the surveillance and constraints of home environments. Students were often required to participate in lessons from shared or public areas of their homes, which restricted their ability to engage freely in classroom discussions, particularly on sensitive or identity-related topics. As Sutton observed: '[students often] had to be in a public part of the house [while learning online] . . . they weren't as free to say whatever they want to say'.

Casey echoed these concerns, highlighting the impact of constant parental presence:

Having parental influence 24 h a day is not necessarily a good thing for a child to learn balanced viewpoints from. . .we have some horrific parents with some horrific views. . .schools has always had a moderating influence. . .without the actual physical presence within schools, and an alternative adult to [expose them to alternative viewpoints]. . .I think we lose the ability online to shape opinions in the in between parts.

These teachers' reflections suggest that remote learning disrupted both pedagogical routines and undermined the relational scaffolding and trust that supports identity affirmation and development. The absence of informal contact with trusted adults, alongside limited exposure to alternative voices particularly disadvantaged the LGBTQ+ students in unsupportive domestic spaces. Teachers' accounts also emphasise how LGBTQ+ inclusion often operates through the hidden curriculum—through everyday conversations, social interactions, and safe spaces—which proved difficult to maintain during remote learning. The diminished visibility or absence of these institutional structures exposes the precariousness of LGBTQ+ inclusion when not explicitly embedded within the formal curriculum.

Upon returning to in-person schooling after lockdown, all participating teachers reported that their schools implemented a 'bubble' system, in which year groups were kept separate to minimise cross-contact. As Ira explained, this system required students in different year groups to start and finish the school day at staggered times, significantly limiting opportunities for inter-year interaction.

For LGBTQ+ leads, this presented a challenge, as the usual mechanisms for fostering inclusion, such as cross-year LGBTQ+ clubs and informal support networks, were disrupted. Despite these constraints, some LGBTQ+ leads did attempt to maintain visibility and support across the school. Riley, for example, made the decision to continue running an LGBTQ+ space but limited participation to a single year group, selecting the group they believed was most in need of support:

Rainbow club has stopped and it's literally because our kids have bubbled. We can only run it for year nine and that sucks. . .we had to ascertain which year group had the highest number of need.

This situation underscores the competing demands faced by LGBTQ+ leads: balancing adherence to institutional safety protocols with efforts to sustain continuity of support for students whose sense of belonging and identity affirmation was already fragile. Whilst Riley's decision to prioritise one year group is, on the one hand, commendable, her decision also reveals an underlying assumption that need could be assessed based on students who were openly LGBTQ+ and known to her. This approach risks overlooking students who may be questioning, who may not be 'out', or who are navigating complex family circumstances that limit their visibility. Such students may have existed in other year groups, but the constraints of the school's 'bubble' system likely limited Riley's ability to identify and support them.

In contrast to Riley, other LGBTQ+ leads made the decision not to continue running LGBTQ+ groups during the 'bubble' period. Their rationale centered on concerns about

equity—offering support to some students while excluding others—and was perceived as potentially unfair. Additionally, the practical workload of meeting with individual year groups during separate lunch breaks or after school sessions was considered unsustainable. As Ever reflected, this resulted in schools adopting a stance that was 'more isolationist. . . than inclusive.'

River captured the emotional strain experienced by many LGBTQ+ leads during this period:

> *We don't have a safe space anymore because we're not allowed to mix the segments of year groups. . . and there are issues involved with the workarounds. But again, I've not been approached to think about any workarounds. It's very much been left to me, who's. . . just a teacher. If I want to push [LGBTQ+ inclusion], I'm going to need to push that myself. And as a drama teacher, I have got enough issues with my subject specialism that I can't focus on inclusion, no matter how important it is to me. I need to focus on what I am paid to do, and I am paid to be a drama teacher at the moment, so that's what I need to focus on.*

This quote highlights how LGBTQ+ inclusion often relies on the voluntary labour of individual teachers, typically undertaken in their own time and without institutional support. The functional impact of the pandemic highlighted the risks of a reliance on the efforts of individual teachers. The absence of leadership-driven solutions or encouragement to develop 'workarounds' for safe spaces underscores the lack of structural commitment to LGBTQ+ inclusion. At the same time, the pressure teachers felt to prioritise subject-specific responsibilities, particularly under the strain of pandemic-related adaptations, reveals how institutional expectations limited their capacity to sustain inclusive practices.

These conditions reinforced the vulnerability of LGBTQ+ inclusion, rendering it highly susceptible to disruption during the COVID-19 pandemic. As access to affirming spaces disappeared, so too did opportunities for LGBTQ+ students to express their identities, feel recognised and a sense of belonging within the school environment. This erosion of embodied affirmation resulted in what could be described as a form of LGBTQ+ silence, characterised by a withdrawal of voice and visibility, which occurred through the absence of conditions that had previously enabled LGBTQ+ expression in both curricular and social spaces.

However, one teacher, Phoenix, was able to maintain consistent contact with LGBTQ+ students during lockdown. Phoenix offers a contrast to many of the challenges experienced by others. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Phoenix explained that they had established a dedicated online LGBTQ+ space on the school's intranet. This virtual space was initially created as a response to the student-led assembly on LGBTQ+ identities and served as a hub to share resources and build a community among LGBTQ+ students. Phoenix reflected positively on how this space continued to function during the pandemic:

> *Yeah, and it was really lovely. So when pride happens we were talking about online pride events they [students] are going to go to. . .and what's going to happen in 2020. . .I put a few assignments, you know, like if I could have an LGBT rep within each year. . .I have already spoken to SLT [Senior Leadership Team] about that. . .last year we had eleven reps which was great because they were like the middle person between student and teacher. . .and they were really vocal. . .it can be quite daunting when you're a student putting up a comment on the wall of a Google Classroom. . .it was lovely to see those comments on pride day, a lot of them were saying happy pride.*

Phoenix's experience illustrates that, where digital inclusion structures were embedded, it was possible to sustain LGBTQ+ visibility and embodiment, providing continued support, even during a crisis. However, this example also reinforces a broader theme in the findings,

that LGBTQ+ inclusion is often reliant upon the initiative and foresight of individual labour. The digital space that Phoenix provided was not institutionally mandated but rather stemmed from her personal commitment. This further highlights the inconsistency of LGBTQ+ provision across schools.

Overall, the findings suggest that while schools actively responded to class-based disadvantage and teachers demonstrated greater awareness of other visible identities, such as ethnicity, LGBTQ+ identities were more frequently sidelined or omitted. The COVID-19 pandemic contributed to the deprioritsation of LGBTQ+ inclusion, revealing an implicit hierarchy of inclusion shaped by institutional priorities, prevailing cultural norms, and individual efforts.

3.3. Cisheteronormative Fragility and the Limits of Inclusion

Cisheteronormative fragility operated within education institutions prior to, and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on DiAngelo's (2018) concept of white fragility, cisheteronormative fragility refers to the defensive responses and emotional discomfort that emerges when normative assumptions around gender and sexuality are challenged. From the teachers' interviews, fragility became evident not only through avoidance and deflection but also via institutional absence.

This fragility evidences how LGBTQ+ inclusion remained marginalised, precarious and often silenced within schools, echoing queer theory's observation that challenges to normative gender and sexuality frequently trigger defensive silences and institutional avoidance (Sedgwick 1990; Butler 2004). At the same time, such silences undermine the recognition and affirmation that are central to intimate citizenship (Plummer 2003).

When asked how the COVID-19 pandemic may have affected LGBTQ+ inclusion, several teachers responded with visible hesitation and discomfort. These responses were marked not only by absence of knowledge, but also an inability to engage with the question.

Spencer struggled to imagine how LGBTQ+ students may have experienced the pandemic differently to other students:

> *No idea, I've never, I've been in school, I've seen students, I've met with staff, I've been in my room. I don't know, I can't answer that question. . .I don't even know.*

Similarly, Ira noted: "I'm not sure I can kind of answer that question with any confidence whatsoever". These examples reflect more than just knowledge gaps; they underscore a broader refusal to engage with how gender and sexuality identities are structured within both institutional and domestic spaces. The repeated 'I don't know' allows teachers to avoid confronting their own complicity in systems of LGBTQ+ exclusion. This discomfort, a core example of cisheteronormative fragility, enables some teachers to position LGBTQ+ issues as outside their professional remit.

In some cases, teachers claimed that the pandemic had no impact on LGBTQ+ inclusion because there had been little to no inclusion prior to the pandemic. Kit summarised, 'So no, just because there wasn't any'. Other teachers echoed similar sentiments. Parker and Koda remarked that it was 'hard to impact nothing' while Summer noted, 'Because that's not really an agenda of inclusion, I can't say that anything changed.'

These responses reveal the persistence of a default culture of cisheteronormativity, in which cisgender and heterosexual norms remain maintained, unchallenged, and institutionally embedded. The absence of LGBTQ+ visibility is not framed as an issue, but a norm and consequently unchallenged. This structural erasure reflects a form of fragility because the system's failure to include LGBTQ+ visibility for students is so entrenched that disruption is not even perceived as necessary. By accepting the invisibility of LGBTQ+ identities as normal or unremarkable, educators risk reinforcing the very inequalities that inclusive education seeks to address.

Another common response by some teachers was to universalise the impact of COVID-19. Teachers like Tan deflected the focus towards more institutionally recognised forms of disadvantage:

Yeah, I mean every student's impacted. . .I think where the greatest impact will have been, will have been down to socioeconomic status. . ..

Lux took a similar approach:

. . .statistically, your students that are from a different ethnic background are more likely to be your pupil premium students, more likely to be from deprived homes, and so it has been a sort of double hit on that community as well.

Charlie added

I don't think it's [COVID-19] had a particular damaging impact upon LGBTQIA any more than it has had an effect on any other forms of inclusion. . .I've not seen any evidence to suggest otherwise.

Here, Charlie risks ignoring the lived realities and potential distinct harms that LGBTQ+ students may experience confined for prolonged periods in unsupportive or openly hostile environments. This was particularly significant for those for whom schools had previously served as a vital space for identity affirmation and emotional safety. The assertion 'I've not seen any evidence to suggest otherwise' may also serve as a defence tactic, placing the burden of proof onto the already marginalised. Although these statements highlight valid structural inequalities, they also overlook the intersectional experiences of LGBTQ+ students, particularly those who lacked private or affirming domestic spaces during lockdown. In doing so, they echo the logic of 'all lives matter' (Halstead 2017), where specificity is deflected away from nuanced, marginalised identities in favour of generalised claims.

Perhaps more troubling, were accounts where teachers described lockdown as a positive for LGBTQ+ students, not because schools were affirming, but because they were not. Some teachers described school environments as a site of bullying, exclusion, and silencing. In these cases, being at home in lockdown was perceived as protection.

Spencer shared

No idea [if LGBTQ+ students have been impacted by COVID-19], I no longer have one of the gay students. . .in my class because he was taken out because of all the bullying. . .he was taken out of History. . .and taken out of other subjects just to keep away from kids who can't stop bullying him.

Tatum recalled a similar perspective:

I would say for some students, not coming into school might have been a relief because of the bullying aspects. . .and so I would think being locked down is a bit of a relief.

These accounts are troubling as they position school itself, not just the pandemic, as a site of harm. Rather than acting as a space of safety and affirmation for diverse gender and sexuality identities, the school becomes a space from which LGBTQ+ students must be removed. Fragility here becomes institutional and embodied, revealed in the failure to intervene in the silence and harm where LGBTQ+ students are removed rather than the hostile conditions addressed.

While the dominant pattern across teachers accounts reflected silencing, disruption to affirming spaces, or harm, a minority of teachers described more positive outcomes for some LGBTQ+ students during the pandemic. These accounts were shaped by home environments that were positive in affirming their LGBTQ+ identities. Hollis observed

Some of our young people who identity as part of the LGBT+ community. It's been so different during this time. So, some young people, they have really found it was a time to. . .explore their own identity. . .we've had some young people coming back to be far

> *more confident saying, 'this is how I identify'. . .and they have had the reassurance at*
> *home in a really safe place over that time, so that's been really interesting.*

This view illustrates how, in supportive home environments, LGBTQ+ students may have experienced a degree of freedom to reflect on and affirm their identities away from the social regulation of the school setting. This reflects Warner's (2002) idea of the *counterpublic*: spaces outside dominant norms where marginalised identities can find recognition and belonging.

However, these experiences were neither universal nor guaranteed. Many teachers were concerned that not all students had access to or felt that their domestic context was affirming. For some LGBTQ+ students, home was marked by silence, surveillance, or active hostility toward their identities. Rather than contradicting the findings on cisheteronormative fragility, these examples underline its impact on LGBTQ+ embodiment. Most schools lacked the structures and cultures to provide affirming conditions and thus highlight the precarious nature of LGBTQ+ inclusion within schools.

4. Discussion and Implications

This research contributes to a growing body of work on LGBTQ+ inclusion in education by foregrounding teachers' perspectives during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important to note that the study does not claim that inequalities faced by LGBTQ+ students during the pandemic were greater than those related to class, race, or gender. Rather, by centering teachers' perspectives on LGBTQ+ inclusion, this article highlights a specific dimension of inequality that has received comparatively less attention, and which coexisted alongside other well-documented disparities. The findings illustrate how pandemic conditions disrupted some teachers', and by extension some schools', efforts to include and affirm LGBTQ+ identities. Although inclusive policies such as the Equality Act (2010) remained formally in place, and no governmental directive suspended them, the pandemic did not so much generate new exclusions as it exposed the precarious and uneven foundations upon which LGBTQ+ inclusion often rests.

Teachers' accounts illustrated the integral role that school staff play in fostering an inclusive culture, especially for LGBTQ+ students, who can experience school as a site of safety and affirmation where learning and identity development can flourish. Drawing on Plummer's (2003) notion of intimate citizenship, which centres on individuals' rights to recognition, self-expression, and relational belonging within public institutions, the findings reveal how the pandemic disrupted these rights in profound ways. Teachers described how LGBTQ+ students experienced a significant loss of identity-affirming spaces during COVID-19. School-based LGBTQ+ clubs, informal interactions beyond the classroom, and in-lesson discussions—all spaces where students could embody and articulate their identities—were suspended, restricted, or rendered impossible, interrupting identity development (Youdell 2006).

These spaces functioned as a form of counterpublics (Warner 2002), a key concept in queer theory, offering refuge from potential unsupportive home environments and enabling expressions of intimate citizenship. However, many of these spaces existed within the hidden curriculum rather than the formal structures of schooling and often relied on a few committed educators. LGBTQ+ leads within schools described the personal burden of sustaining inclusion during the pandemic, often without institutional recognition or support. These findings echo existing literature on the emotional labour of inclusion work (Brett 2024; Formby 2015) and highlight how LGBTQ+ students' access to recognition, expression, and belonging, the core tenets of intimate citizenship, remains precariously dependent on individual goodwill rather than systemic provision.

This research also highlights the tension between institutional compliance and meaningful inclusion. Although schools are legally obligated under the Equality Act (2010) and

other statutory frameworks to promote LGBTQ+ inclusion, and these obligations were not suspended during the pandemic, teachers reported that such efforts were often deprioritised in favour of ensuring digital access, delivering core curriculum content, and meeting performance targets. Drawing on Ahmed's (2012) concept of the *non-performative*, this tendency reflects how schools may fulfil the minimal procedural requirements of equality policy without enacting substantive change. Inclusion, in this context, is treated as an optional supplement rather than a structural imperative.

The non-performative nature of institutional responses was further illustrated by disparities in how schools addressed different forms of marginalisation. Teachers noted that issues of racial inequity, particularly in the wake of George Floyd's murder, garnered more visible institutional attention than those related to gender and sexual diversity. As one teacher, Avery, put it, LGBTQ+ identities were at the 'bottom of the pile.' This was despite growing concerns among staff about the mental health of LGBTQ+ students and the safety and wellbeing related risks posed by unsupportive home environments (Rich et al. 2022; Just Like Us 2022). Yet, these concerns were not institutionally prioritised. This does not suggest race was overemphasised, but rather highlights how schools selectively prioritized certain forms of inclusion while sidelining others, producing a hierarchy of recognition that positioned LGBTQ+ identities at the margins.

These findings reinforce the argument that institutional inclusion is shaped by prevailing social narratives and political salience rather than consistent principles of equity. As a result, LGBTQ+ students faced a double marginalisation: first, through the erasure of affirming school-based spaces during the pandemic; and second, through the failure of schools to recognise and respond to their nuanced vulnerabilities.

The lack of embedded LGBTQ+ inclusion allowed cisheteronormativity to flourish. Some teachers evidenced cisheteronormative fragility in their avoidance, discomfort, and deflection—either by failing to consider how LGBTQ+ students were impacted by the pandemic or by insisting that the pandemic had no effect simply because no prior structures existed. These responses, while not overtly hostile, reveal deeper systemic norms in which cisgender and heterosexual identities remain the default. Such defensive postures work to protect a culture of cisgender and heterosexual comfort over critical engagement. In this sense, bullying is not a discrete issue to be managed, but as one manifestation of the wider structural cisheteronormativity that shapes everyday school life.

This fragility was further evidenced in the way some teachers framed the pandemic as beneficial for LGBTQ+ students, suggesting that absence from school spared them from bullying, echoing findings from Gill and McQuillan (2022). While this view recognises that schools are often unsafe for queer youth, it simultaneously reveals a reluctance to interrogate the very structures that make schools harmful in the first place. Rather than prompting reflection on institutional complicity or the need for systemic change, the idea that safety was found through invisibility reinforces the notion that inclusion is conditional and that LGBTQ+ students' wellbeing is only possible when they are out of sight. Together these accounts illustrate the ambivalence of schools as sites of both affirmation and harm, underscoring that LGBTQ+ students' safety and belonging remain precarious and contingent rather than structurally secured.

These accounts illuminate a troubling paradox: protection was only achievable when LGBTQ+ students were physically absent from school life. Within this framing, safety is not a right ensured through inclusive practice, but a by-product of exclusion. As such, LGBTQ+ students are positioned not as full participants but as peripheral figures whose presence is seen to unsettle normative educational cultures. This positioning undermines their intimate and educational citizenship, the right to belong, to be visible, and to have their identities affirmed as part of the everyday fabric of school life.

Crucially, the fact that safety was perceived as both inside and outside the school—by teachers who acknowledged that home was not always a safe space for LGBTQ+ students, and by others who did not view school as safe—calls into question prevailing definitions of safeguarding. A cisheteronormative lens on safeguarding tends to protect institutional norms rather than the students most at risk, prioritising the comfort of the majority over critical engagement with systemic harm.

These findings point to several implications for policy and practice. First, LGBTQ+ inclusion must be reframed as structural rather than supplemental. This means embedding LGBTQ+ identities meaningfully across the curriculum and ensuring that support structures are resilient in times of crisis, rather than dependent on circumstance or individual initiative. The governments decision to permit schools to delay full implementation of statutory RSE until summer 2021 due to COVID-19 illustrates how inclusion was positioned as negotiable in policy terms. While framed as pragmatic, this flexibility reinforced the marginalization of LGBTQ+ content and demonstrates how cisheteronormative fragility operates not only within schools but at the level of educational governance.

Secondly, institutions must challenge cisheteronormative fragility through sustained professional development, starting at initial teacher education training. This development must go beyond procedural compliance to foster critical reflexivity and equip educators to actively challenge normative assumptions.

Third, the everyday relational work of inclusion must be revalued, not as optional, but central to educational practice, and not to be left to unpaid emotional labour of individual educators. As the findings show, small yet affirming interactions are not marginal but foundational. These practices exemplify the principles of intimate citizenship and can offer students meaningful experiences of safety and recognition. When schools support this work institutionally, rather than relying on voluntarism, they move closer to enacting substantive, rather than symbolic, inclusion.

Finally, schools should draw on the lessons of lockdown to develop hybrid models of LGBTQ+ provision that combine in-person and online safe spaces. Phoenix's example shows how digital platforms can sustain visibility and support when physical spaces are disrupted. While recognising that LGBTQ+ inclusion has important safeguarding dimensions—particularly for students in unsupportive domestic contexts—such groups must not be reduced to risk management. Instead, they should be framed as affirming, proactive spaces that contribute to student wellbeing and flourishing. To achieve this, provision should be formally recognized and resourced within school policy, and staff supported through professional development to facilitate these spaces responsibly.

In conclusion, the pandemic not only created the vulnerabilities experienced by LGBTQ+ students but also exposed and intensified them. These were not new gaps but long-standing inequities brought into sharper focus. The challenge is not to repair what is lost but to reimagine what inclusive education might become if education institutions were truly spaces of intimate citizenship for all.

Note

1 This term is used to encapsulate both cisgender and heterosexuality within the context of the LGBTQ+ community. Other terms used in research include heterosexual fragility and straight fragility.

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