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Hope, MA and Hall, JJ orcid.org/0000-0002-5821-7224 (2018) 'This feels like a whole new thing': a case study of a new LGBTQ-affirming school and its role in developing 'inclusions'. International Journal of Inclusive Education, 22 (12). pp. 1320-1332. ISSN 1360-3116

https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2018.1427152

Title

‘This feels like a whole new thing’: A case study of a new LGBTQ-affirming school and its role in developing ‘inclusions’.

Abstract

The notion of inclusive education has ‘multiple meanings’ (Artiles, Harris-Murri, and Rostenberg 2006) and the precise definition remains contested. In particular, the debate rages as to whether it is appropriate for some schools to offer specialised provision to particular cohorts of students rather than to educate everyone within a common school. This manuscript foregrounds rich empirical data from students, parents and educators at Pride School Atlanta, described as ‘the South’s first school for LGBTQ students’ (Pratt 2016), a new small, democratic, private school with the explicit intention of creating a ‘thriving space’ for ‘gay, straight, queer, gender-queer’ children, young people and families; a space that moves ‘beyond safety’. By drawing on Dyson’s (2012) work on ‘inclusions’ and moving away from the simple binary of what is inclusive/exclusive, this manuscript addresses the question of whether a school, which offers specialised provision to a small group of students, can play a role in inclusive education. It argues that this model of schooling, described by one student as ‘a whole new thing’ offers opportunities for presence, participation, and achievement (Ainscow et al., 2006), recognition and achievement (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Keywords

Inclusions; LGBTQ-inclusive, LGBTQ-affirming; Pride School Atlanta; Georgia; U.S.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Spencer Foundation [Grant Number 201600140]. Research was conducted through the University of Hull, UK.

Introduction

The philosophy of 'inclusive education' has shaped educational debate for over two decades, particularly since the introduction of the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1994), an international document which significantly influenced the way in which many countries developed education policies. Although it is widely accepted that inclusion is relevant to all children and not just to those who have traditionally been defined as having special educational needs (SEN), the question as to the best way of meeting the needs of all children remains unanswered. In particular, the debate rages as to whether it is appropriate for some schools to offer 'specialised' provision to particular cohorts of students rather than to educate everyone within a 'common school'. The Salamanca Statement - or more accurately, the form of 'inclusive education' that informed it and flowed from it – has frequently been interpreted as meaning that all children should be educated in their local schools and that schools should be resourced so that they can meet the needs of all children (Ainscow and César 2006; Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006; Norwich 2013; Forlin 2006). Advocates of models of schooling which offer separate or 'specialised' provision for particular cohorts have been criticised as being 'anti-inclusionist' (Brantlinger 1997).

In August 2016, a new school opened in Atlanta, Georgia. This small, private, democratic school is Pride School Atlanta. It is described here as an 'LGBTQ-affirming' school; one which strives to offer an environment in which lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual or allies (LGBTQQIAA) will feel safe within a learning environment in which their identities are honoured (Pride School Atlanta 2017, emphasis added). Although it has been described as a 'first-of-its-kind school for LGBT youth' (French 2016), its development has been strongly influenced by two other schools in the U.S.: Harvey Milk High School is a publicly funded school that opened in 1985 in New York

City[1]; Alliance School is a charter school in Milwaukee which opened in 2005. All three of these schools might be described as 'LGBTQ-inclusive' or 'LGBTQ-affirming' even though they are all actually open to everyone, regardless of their gender or sexual identities. They could also be characterised as 'specialised provision' as they operate differently from the model of a single, common school for all. The question that is addressed throughout this manuscript is whether Pride School (and LGBTQ-affirming schools more generally) have a role to play in terms of inclusive education and if so, how they might be positioned within this field.

This manuscript starts with an overview of the research design and the research questions that guided the study as whole. This is followed by an articulation of the theoretical framework that underpinned the study, particularly with regards to defining inclusive education. This discussion is concise so as to be able to foreground the empirical data from the case study. Data are presented in terms of two central justifications for why Pride School operates as separate provision: a) to offer a 'safe space'; b) to offer a 'thriving space'. The manuscript concludes with an argument that although the school might reasonably be described as a 'little cocoon' (Michelle, advisor for Georgia-based NGO) or a 'bubble' (Clare, age 16, UK LGBTQ-centred youth group), it is also accurate to suggest that it is a 'whole new thing' for LGBTQ+ young people; a substantially different form of schooling that has a significant role to play in terms of 'inclusions'.

Research Design: Radical Inclusivity/Exclusivity

This research study is entitled ''Radical Inclusivity/Exclusivity: Reconsidering 'exclusive' schools and their role within 'inclusive' education'. The overall aim, as stated in the initial

[1] HMHS became a fully accredited public school in 2002

proposal, is ‘To provide new insights into the extent in which ‘exclusive’ schools might contribute to the theory and practice of inclusive education.’ Despite the title, the research was designed in such a way as to move beyond the inclusive/exclusive binary, particularly because it became apparent that describing Harvey Milk High School, Alliance School and Pride School as ‘exclusive’ schools was neither helpful nor accurate.

Pride School, one of three schools in the U.S. that fit our requirement of being an ‘LGBTQ-affirming school’, was selected because it was new and had not been part of any previous research study. Its newness was both an advantage and a disadvantage. On the one hand, the school had attracted a great deal of media interest and stakeholders – both internal and external – were keen to discuss it. In addition, the newness of the school enabled particular reflections on the part of students, parents and educators as they were all grappling with their initial experiences of being part of this school. This detailed recollection was crucial in terms of understanding why they had chosen Pride School and how it compared with previous experiences. On the other hand, as the students, parents and staff had only been involved with the school for a matter of weeks, it was too early to collect substantial amounts of meaningful data about curriculum, pedagogy or achievement.

The research was planned and conducted by two UK-based researchers, one of whom is an educationalist and the other a geographer. Data were gathered through conducting an in-depth qualitative case study of Pride School which included one-to-one and focus group interviews with students, parents and staff, observations of school activities and meetings, documentary analysis of websites and social media. It also included interviews with stakeholders from educational and community groups in Atlanta. Extensive analysis of media coverage of Pride School and other LGBTQ-affirming schools was undertaken. Previously published academic

literature about LGBTQ-affirming schools was also consulted, all of which related to Harvey Milk High School rather than Alliance School or Pride School (e.g. Rofes 1989; Rasmussen 2004; Hedlund 2004; Mayes 2006; Bethard 2004). Finally, focus groups were conducted with three LGBTQ-centred youth groups in the UK. These acted as opportunities to share data and initial findings from the case study research and to 'test out' themes and arguments. In all, twenty formal interviews took place and 83 people were directly involved as participants. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in full. The names of all young people, parents, and other stakeholders have been changed to protect anonymity. Permission has been given to identify the school and its founder, Christian Zsilavetz, by the use of real names.

Theoretical Framework: inclusive education

The research that grounds this manuscript was underpinned by a broad-based interest in notions of inclusion and exclusion, and in particular, on whether a study of LGBTQ-affirming schools could contribute to an understanding of the field of inclusive education. Whilst informed by an understanding of poststructuralism, feminist theory, queer theory and critical theory, it did not have a specific hypothesis and did not attempt to gather data to reinforce any particular position. Rather, it was loosely guided by the principles of grounded theory in which researchers enter the field with an 'open mind' (Dey 2007, 176) and use 'open-ended, non-judgmental questions' through which 'unanticipated statements and stories' can emerge (Charmaz 2006, 26). It is for this reason that original quotations from data are used extensively throughout this manuscript.

Defining 'inclusive education' in a way that conveys the complexity of the field and yet is understandable to a wide audience has been a challenge for inclusive educators for more than two decades. Inclusive education is notoriously difficult to define, partly because it is seen as

both a statement of principle and a set of practices. Its development is inseparable from the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1994), signed by 92 governments, and heralded as 'the most significant international document that has ever appeared in the field of special education' (Ainscow and César 2006, 231). This document outlines a vision where 'schools should accommodate all children' (p6) and where 'The fundamental principle of the inclusive school is that all children should learn together, wherever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have' (p11). The Salamanca Statement, though specifically focussing on special needs education, also generalised its stance to include many other groups including 'children from other disadvantaged or marginalized groups' (p6). It makes no specific reference to gender, gender identity or sexual orientation though the reference to 'marginalized groups' might be taken to imply that these groups are included. The Salamanca Statement - or more accurately, the form of 'inclusive education' that informed it and flowed from it – has frequently been interpreted as meaning that all children should be educated in their local schools and that schools should be resourced so that they can meet the needs of all children (Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006; Allan 2006; Barton 2003; Liasidou 2012; Messiou 2016). This interpretation presents a challenge to LGBTQ-affirming schools as they are, by their very existence, distinct from mainstream provision.

The Salamanca Statement has been critiqued for being 'a deeply ambiguous document' which is 'couched in absolutist language' (Dyson 2012, 37). Though the significance of this document is hard to deny in terms of its global impact on inclusive education policies and practices, it is important to remember that the Salamanca Statement is, to some extent, an aspirational document; it sets out a vision for how education should be, not how education is or even can be. Advocates of special education have criticised the principles enshrined in the Salamanca Statement as 'political ideology' (Warnock 2010, 37) and as 'ideological purity' (Norwich 2013, 9). By this, they mean that the ideal of educating all children within the same

schools has dominated educational policy-making without due attention to the practicalities of achieving this. They, of course, mean this with reference to children with special educational needs and the experiences of LGBTQ+ students are markedly different from these. Nonetheless, these critiques give a strong indication of how LGBTQ-affirming schools might be viewed by those committed to the core principles of the Salamanca Statement.

The contested nature of inclusive education has divided educational researchers and educationalists into two groups, or maybe more accurately, onto a spectrum. There are those who advocate for the 'common school' where central characteristics of inclusive education relate to the location and structure of schooling and for whom labelling of any sort is anachronistic (such as Barton 2003; Slee 2011; Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006; Messiou 2016). These are described by Cigman (2007) as universalists and by Norwich (2013, 10) as those who hold an 'an unchanging, all-encompassing unitary vision'. There are others, described by Cigman (2007) as moderates and by Norwich (2013, 10) as those who seek 'resolutions to tensions, realising that this will not be in the form of a pure coherent position'. The people in this group are less wedded to the realisation of a single common school for all and are more accepting of the use of labels in some circumstances. The tensions between those at the two ends of this spectrum have been intense, with the universalists being described as 'ideologues' (Kavale and Mostert 2004) and the moderates being accused of being 'anti-inclusionists' (Brantlinger 1997, 428). This manuscript reluctantly aligns itself towards the 'moderate' end of the spectrum, though strongly challenging the suggestion that this might be an anti-inclusionist position. In contrast, data will be presented to argue that in the case of Pride School, establishing itself as a separate entity enables a greater degree of inclusivity for students. This is because, for many, their previous experiences were intolerable. As the data outlined in this manuscript indicate, they have chosen Pride School

because it is a) a safe space; and b) a thriving space. Neither of these spaces had been available to them elsewhere.

It could be tempting to argue that Pride School cannot be inclusive on the grounds that it requires specialised provision and thus cannot be a 'common school for all'. This would be a purist position and is not the one taken within this manuscript. Clark (1999, 47: italics in original) has argued that educators should 'be less concerned with characterizing schools as `inclusive' or `non-inclusive' than with identifying particular ways in which, at particular times, they are more inclusive for some students or more exclusive for others.' This coheres with Dyson's (2012) argument that it is helpful to move away from binary thinking in which practice is categorised as either inclusive or exclusive and towards a model of 'inclusions'. He stated that:

> ... it perhaps makes sense to talk not of inclusion, but of inclusions, and to seek not a single form of 'inclusive school' so much as a wide range of practice and organization, which needs constantly to be interrogated in terms of the different notions of inclusion that are available (Dyson 2012, 46: italics in original).

In this vein, this manuscript argues that it is important to closely examine the data from Pride School in order to ascertain whether it offers one of these forms of 'inclusions', albeit not one which is consistent with the ideal of the common school for all.

Determining how and in what ways any school can claim to be inclusive requires digging deeper into what inclusion and exclusion mean in practice. It is more than simply about location. The Index for Inclusion (Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006) has been a highly influential document, in the UK and internationally (Vislie 2003), as it outlines clear criteria for schools to use to evaluate and assess their own inclusiveness. It is therefore a useful one

to use in the context of this manuscript. It argues that inclusion 'is focused on **presence, participation** and **achievement'** (Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006, 25). Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011, 817) adapted this in their study and added '**recognition** and **acceptance'**. All five of these criteria are used to inform the analysis of LGBTQ-affirming schools. These five words are presented in bold font throughout the manuscript to remind readers of the criteria used to assess inclusivity here.

This manuscript argues that the data from this study indicate that students at Pride School were able to be **present, to participate, to feel acceptance and recognition**. Achievement is harder to assess at this stage, especially because there might be differing expectations as to what achievement might mean. Further discussion on the **achievement** of students at Pride School – in terms of how this is perceived and whether this is achieved – can only be ascertained once the school has been open for longer.

Case Study of Pride School: 'the South's first school for LGBTQ students' (Pratt 2016)

Pride School Atlanta is a small, private, democratic school which opened in August 2016. It opened with eight students aged from 8 to 17, although it hopes to attract approximately 15 per year until it reaches a maximum of 60. The school is led by Christian Zsilavetz, a trans educator with an increasingly high public profile who has deliberately courted media interest and developed a strong presence on social media. His rationale is that:

> I wanted to do heavy press because I wanted people to find out about us ... I wanted a school where it was very clear that we were openly affirming ... that it wasn't hidden in a non discrimination clause, it wasn't hidden to the rest of the community.

This, in conjunction with the discursive practices of the media, has resulted in Pride School being characterised as a ‘gay school’ or at least one that ‘only caters for queer and trans families’ (Saxena 2015). In reality, this is not the case. It is open to everyone, regardless of their gender or sexual identities (see Hall and Hope forthcoming, for discussion on role of media on framing discourses on 'gay schools').

Pride School, as one of only three explicitly ‘LGBTQ-affirming’ schools in the U.S., is both intriguing and challenging for those inside and outside the school. Extensive media coverage of the school has focussed on some of the more obvious critiques, such as accusations of ‘segregation’ and of ‘coddling children’ (Owens 2015; Saxena 2015; Novacic 2016). These are similar to criticisms raised about Harvey Milk High School, Alliance School and speculative proposals for similar schools in Chicago (U.S.), Toronto (Canada), and Manchester (UK) (Colapinto 2005; Younge 2012). This study aimed to consider some of these issues and to enable others to be uncovered.

There were five main interconnected critiques that were raised throughout this study, some by Atlanta-based stakeholders outside the school, some by internal stakeholders, and some by UK-based LGBTQ+ young people. These were: a) accusations of segregation in terms of Pride School being aimed at LGBTQ students; b) concerns about inaccessibility in terms of location, the need to have supportive parents, and lack of ethnic diversity; c) dangers about exclusivity as a result of Pride School being fee-paying and thus a ‘place of privilege’; d) anxieties that the consequence of attending Pride School would mean that LGBTQ+ students did not ‘live in the real world’; e) challenges to the democratic, free-school model.

These critiques are complex and add weight to the argument that an inclusive/exclusive binary is unhelpful. They will be addressed throughout this manuscript, though not all can be easily countered. For example, despite Pride School’s explicit commitment to finding

ways of offering scholarships, engaging with families from all communities and sharing transport if necessary, at least for now, the words of one UK-based young person are hard to dispute: 'the most vulnerable people are the ones that are not going to be able to access it' (George, age 17, UK LGBTQ-centred youth group). A university professor similarly described it as a 'place of privilege'. In this sense, Pride School might certainly be seen as being 'exclusive', but then so could every other private school in Atlanta. The analysis of this school and its relationship with inclusive education, therefore, needs to go further than this.

Similarly, the issue of whether Pride School is 'a bubble' (Clare, age 16, UK LGBTQ-centred youth group), which protects young people from the 'real world' is an interesting one. As one educator from the city explained: 'if a kid is there the whole time and nowhere else ... in some little cocoon ... I don't think that's healthy' (Michelle, advisor for Georgia-based NGO). Parents from the school responded to this critique in two ways: first, by arguing that their children had to spend most of their lives in the 'real world' and that they encountered other people on a daily basis; and second, by justifying that it was reasonable to want to protect your own child. Again, the inclusive/exclusive binary does not help with analysing this position. In contrast, by conceptualising inclusion as comprising of **presence, participation, achievement** (Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006), **recognition** and **acceptance** (Florian and Black-Hawkins 2011), it can help focus attention on deeper issues.

Analysis of the data from this study provides two strong justifications as to why Pride School has been established as separate, specialised provision. Both of these offer an implicit - and sometimes explicit - critique of other schools in Atlanta. These will be

presented in terms of a) providing a safe space and b) providing a thriving space. Arguments about inclusion will be weaved throughout.

Safety: 'The school's kind of a lifesaver' (Alfie, age 14)

The children and young people who attend Pride School do not all identify as LGBTQ. In this sense, it is not segregated provision, in terms of being enforced separation justified on the grounds of offering 'separate but equal' provision to different social or ethnic groups (Ford 2004). Anyone can choose to attend Pride School for whatever reason. In the words of the founder: 'it is not exclusive to LGBT youth' (Christian Zsilavetz). In terms of whether these children and young people have now become separated from mainstream provision, it is worth noting that most of the current students were not previously attending other schools, be they public or private. They were not even **present** and therefore could not have **participated** or **achieved** as students in these schools. By contrast, they were in home education; some who had been home educated for most of their lives but most of whom had started to be home educated when insurmountable problems arose in previous schools. They had, therefore, stepped out of home education in order to attend Pride School; they had not – in the main – directly left other schools. Their attendance at Pride School meant that they were **present** and therefore in a position to **participate**. The importance of this cannot be overstated. The issue of **achievement** relies on both of these prerequisites. The problems that had occurred in previous schools appeared largely to relate to safety.

There is overwhelming evidence that a lack of safety – or at least a fear of being unsafe – is a major factor affecting the lives of young people at Pride School. Many of them alluded to bullying, violence and harassment in their previous schools, and by way of contrast, the feeling of being safe at Pride School. The school was described as being a 'safe haven' (Steve, age 14) and a 'lifesaver' (Alfie, age 14). One explained that:

> I'd say a safe place, because, I mean, I'm not waking up every day scared that I'm going to get here and I'm going to get beat up, or I'm going to get, you know, a knife pulled on me in the bathroom. So, I feel like that's safe, so it's a safe place, yeah (Steve, age 14)

One parent outlined the previous experiences of her child:

> He was bullied every day at school, knowing … 'they don't even know I am trans, but they still hate me because I am so girly, even though I dress as a boy and my name is Michael, but if they knew that I was really a girl inside, they would be so much worse' (mother of Sugar, age 13).

These data align with substantial amounts of published material about the day-to-day experiences of LGBTQ+ students in schools in the U.S. (Burdge, Licona, and Hemingway 2014; GLSEN 2014; Rofes 1989; Letts and Sears 1999), in the UK (Guasp 2012; Epstein and Johnson 1998; Epstein 2000; Rivers 2011), in Australia (Radcliffe et al. 2013; Rasmussen 2004; Quinlivan 2002) and beyond. Despite many national, state and school interventions to protect LGBTQ+ children, according to research, many young people remain subject to bullying, harassment, and marginalisation in schools, sometimes with the apparent collusion of teachers and school systems (Guasp, Ellison, and Satara 2014; GLSEN 2014). Key stakeholders from the city of Atlanta reinforced this picture, one arguing that: 'we need a separate space for students who are immediately being traumatised' (Susan, LGBTQ rights campaigner).

Interviews with parents gave an insight that the decision to send their child to Pride School was not based solely on previous experiences of bullying or harassment, but on the fear of this. One said that: 'I'm still scared for him to go to the bathroom' (mother of Alex, age 17) and went on to explain that: 'We haven't experienced it [bullying], because we did the pre-emptive … take Alex out of school.' This level of fear of what might have happened was also echoed by some of the students, one stating that:

> I'm very sure that if I went to public school in my last city I would definitely be afraid. It would be awful. No, don't. I don't want to think about it. I don't want to think about it. It's so bad, I mean, you could get, like, beaten to a pulp every day, I know. I've heard stories (Eliza, age 13).

Offering safety to children – and to their parents – seems to be one of the central attractions of Pride School, at least initially. As one parent explained:

> As soon as I met Christian for an hour, I'm, like, 'Okay, I'm done, I'm sold', I really didn't care at that point, honestly, about the regular order, you know, the academic part of it nearly as much as feeling, like, 'Wow, she's going to be really safe here'. So that was like 99% of my decision (mother of Sugar, age 13).

This issue of the fear of being unsafe raises questions about whether Pride School is responding to a need that is real or just perceived. It also aligns with the critique, highlighted earlier, that the school is a 'bubble' in which children are being 'coddled' or 'protected from the real world'. Nonetheless, the importance of having a 'safe haven' was a significant factor in the decision to attend Pride School and was highlighted by almost all

students, parents and staff. Describing it as 'lifesaver' was, in our view, a legitimate description of the school for some who had found other schools intolerable.

It is, of course, crucial for all schools to address the issues that have led these children and young people to feel the need for a 'safe haven' elsewhere. The principles of the Salamanca Statement and those committed to inclusive education are that schools change to ensure they accommodate all students. This position was summarised by one UK-based young person who asserted, 'instead of creating new spaces and making them safe, we should just make the spaces that already exist more safe' (Sam, age 15, UK LGBTQ-centred youth group). Although this is a strong point, it is challenged by the founder of Pride School who questioned how long this might take: 'We have waited long enough, I can't wait any longer for the schools to change' (Christian Zsilavetz).

Moving beyond Safety: 'It is not about creating a safe space, we have tried that, it is about creating a thriving space' (Christian Zsilavetz)

In offering a critique of Pride School as being a safe space, one LGBTQ+ young person in Atlanta argued that: 'School's not always going to be a support group. I don't think school should necessarily be a support group. For me, it never has been for support' (Matt, age 17, Atlanta LGBTQ youth group). This raises the issue of whether Pride School might best be seen as some sort of specialist facility, a support group, a space where young people can heal from traumatic experiences. Some certainly saw it in this way. One educator at the school, for example, argued that: 'there needs to be a place for them where they can heal' (Paula). Seeing it in this way – as a specialist unit where young people can heal from trauma – might make Pride School more palatable for some, but it also reinforces the assumption

that LGBTQ+ young people are 'victims' or in need of specialist support (Sadowski 2016; Monk 2011; Quinlivan 2002; Ellis 2007; Talburt 2004). As one young person in the UK framed this: 'It's kind of like blaming the victim a little bit' (Sam, age 15, UK LGBTQ-centred youth group). This colludes with the 'deficit' approach which many inclusive educators seek to avoid.

The founder of Pride School has a different position which is that 'It is not about creating a safe space ... it is about creating a thriving space' (Christian Zsilavetz). This is more radical and mirrors the work of Sadowski (2016), author of 'Safe is Not Enough', who makes the case that:

> Safety is an essential baseline for schools' ability to meet the needs of LGBTQ students effectively and has served as a critical foundation for efforts to introduce policies and programs at all levels of government to benefit LGBTQ students, but it is not a sufficient goal in itself (Sadowski 2016, 13: italics in original).

Sadowski's (2016) book highlights many examples of innovative practice in schools across the U.S., practices which go far beyond offering safety. These include offering LGBTQ literature programmes, supporting gay-straight alliances and using a Welcoming Schools approach to acknowledge diversity. These examples are from elementary, middle and high schools, some of which are in southern or mid-western states which operate in a similar religious and political climate to Atlanta. What is notable, however, is that these innovative practices have been marked out as unusual. This in itself implies that many mainstream schools struggle with going beyond bringing LGBTQ into anti-bullying policies or putting random 'safe space' stickers on classroom doors. Many do not even do that. One parent of a

Pride School student, for example, refused to send her child to a particular school because it did not name 'sexual orientation' in its list of groups that would be protected from discrimination (mother of Alex, age 17)[2].

Offering a thriving LGBTQ-affirming space is more radical than simply offering a safe space. It is inextricably linked with **participation, belonging, recognition and acceptance**, and as such, strengthens any claim that Pride School offers a form of inclusivity. This implies a different type of school ethos and culture, one that proactively affirms LGBTQ identities rather than simply keeping these students safe from attack. It links with Fraser's (2010) influential work on the politics of recognition and is markedly different from the types of spaces that students had experienced in previous schools. One LGBTQ+ identified young person who attends a different private school in Atlanta explained:

> I am pretty much the only out, queer person, but the other students are mostly accepting of it. That doesn't mean … acceptance doesn't always equal liking or approving, *but I'm tolerated* (Matt, age 17, Atlanta LGBTQ youth group).

At Pride School, there is an explicit intention to offer an affirming space, one in which children and young people can feel something more than 'toleration'. As the founder explained, 'That's why most of them are here, because they don't fit, and here's a place where they can develop pride for being who they are' (Christian Zsilavetz). What this means in practice is interesting. It influences the culture, which, we ascertained through our observations, is supportive and encouraging of each and every person. It also influences the decision to operate as a democratic free school which means that students can work to a personalised programme at their own pace. This is particularly important because some of

[2] This is known as 'enumeration' and is a key issue in the U.S. Many activists start with enumeration as a way of trying to protect LGBTQ-identified children in schools.

the students have missed large sections of schooling and therefore cannot easily slip into age-related expectations of where they might be in terms of the curriculum. This enables **participation** for all students through an **acceptance** of their individual needs.

Offering a thriving space influences the way that the curriculum operates. Although the school had only been open a few weeks, there were already indications that the curriculum itself would be different. We witnessed an interactive discussion with a successful gay author of books aimed at LGBTQ+ teenagers and an open discussion about inviting LGBTQ+ role models into the school to discuss gender identity, both of which indicate **acceptance** and **recognition**. A teacher described how she felt about to 'bring my whole self into the classroom' (Paula) at Pride School, which was a contrast to her previous experiences in public education where she felt she had to 'compartmentalise' because she did not feel comfortable to 'come out' to her students (and she would have had no legal protection if she had done so). At Pride School, she could be herself and she could also bring the experiences of LGBTQ+ people across history into the formal curriculum. She was 'excited about the opportunity to teach the whole story instead of the politically correct version of history' (Paula). This story suggests that teachers, as well as students, might experience **acceptance and recognition.**

For students, being with educators who openly identify as LGBTQ and are willing to talk about this is an important part of the culture of Pride School. It is also important for parents, some of whom work as volunteers at the school whilst their children are in attendance. Some of these parents struggled when their child first 'came out' to them (as gay, as trans) and did not know what to do. Finding the community at Pride School seemed to be as

important for them as for their child. They also experienced **acceptance** which enabled them to **participate** in the life of the school.

Through striving to offer a thriving space, Pride School directly counters the experiences that many LGBTQ+ young people have had in previous schools. As such, it sets itself apart as separate and different from other provision. This specialised form of education offers a level of **recognition** and **acceptance** that students had not experienced previously, which in itself supported students in terms of being **present** and being able to fully **participate**. The provision of this thriving space is perhaps the stronger justification that this school might make in terms of its role in promoting inclusivity.

Conclusion

The model of schooling offered by Pride School and other LGBTQ-affirming schools is contentious amongst educators because it appears to run counter to fundamental values about inclusive education, particularly when the definition of this stems from the Salamanca Statement and the emphasis on the common school for all. This manuscript has taken a different position by moving away from the inclusive/exclusive binary and arguing that there are multiple 'inclusions' (Dyson 2012). By operating as specialised, separate schools, LGBTQ-affirming schools are able to offer safe and thriving spaces which are markedly different from the environments offered in other education provision. The criteria for assessing inclusivity, as identified in the Index for Inclusion (Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006) highlight the importance of presence, participation, and achievement, all of which are evident within LGBTQ-affirming schools. Importantly, two additions to this - acceptance and recognition (Florian and Black-Hawkins 2011) – are explicitly built into the aims and

practices of Pride School, as illustrated by the phrase ‘in which their identities are honoured’ (Pride School Atlanta 2017).

One of the critiques of Pride School is that it is a ‘little cocoon’ for LGBTQ+ students, a ‘bubble’ in which they are kept safe from the ‘real world’. Although this characterisation of being a ‘bubble’ might be a reasonable description, it is also accurate to claim – as one student did - that ‘this feels like a whole new thing’ (Alfie, age 14). This ‘whole new thing’, this entirely different experience in which students felt safe, supported and accepted, is a significant new form of developing ‘inclusions’.

Word Count: 6941

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