

Belong To Primary 2024 Key Survey Findings

New Foundations for LGBTQ+
Inclusivity in Primary Schools

Welcome

This ground-breaking research paves the way for inclusion of LGBTQ+ topics at primary level in a way that is holistic, evidence-based, and age and stage appropriate.

Despite an overwhelming desire to be LGBTQ+ inclusive in their practice, the clear message from the *Belong To Primary* research is that our primary school staff are missing the training, confidence and support needed to make this a reality.

In December 2022, *Belong To* welcomed the publication of *Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying* and, within it, a number of commitments relevant to LGBTQ+ inclusion in primary schools. This included updating the primary SPHE/RSE curriculum to include LGBTQ+ identities, and further measures to address identity-based bullying, including homophobic and transphobic bullying, in schools.

However, it is clear from this research that LGBTQ+ inclusivity cannot be done in isolation.

For LGBTQ+ young people aged 14-25 in Ireland today, the most common age to realise their LGBTQ+ identity is 12, and the most common age to tell another person about their LGBTQ+ identity for the first time is 14.¹ Within this context, primary school emerges as a crucial time for young people in the development of their self-identity, and perceptions and understandings of others.

Belong To – LGBTQ+ Youth Ireland has partnered with the University of Limerick to understand the knowledge levels, views and professional needs of primary school staff in Ireland regarding LGBTQ+ inclusivity. With a final sample of 1,031 primary staff, including principals, deputy principals, class teachers, special needs assistants and support staff, this report encompasses a broad range of views across a wide sample of primary-level educators.

The results of this research are heartening – 9 in 10 primary staff believe it is important for others working in primary schools, including principals and deputy principals, to know about LGBTQ+ inclusivity. Some 80% feel comfortable with a pupil coming out to them as LGBTQ+.

However, a clear gap has emerged between primary school staff's desire to be inclusive, and the level of confidence and knowledge required to put this into practice.

When we look at the relationship between willingness and practice, the answer is clear – confidence is key. Our findings show that primary staff who feel very confident in planning LGBTQ+ inclusive sessions are more likely, by a margin of 65%, to use LGBTQ+ inclusive books and resources.

Where survey respondents gave additional written feedback, three key themes emerged time and time again: guidance, support and training. For primary staff to feel sufficiently confident and comfortable in being LGBTQ+ inclusive in their practice, they are asking for guidance on procedures and better-practice measures to ensure that all LGBTQ+ pupils feel safe and supported in their school, whether they are out as LGBTQ+ or not.

Primary staff have also asked for support from the Department of Education and patronage bodies. They are looking for leadership and clarity as to what the characteristics of an LGBTQ+ inclusive school are. Finally, primary staff repeatedly and strongly called for training on the above areas, primarily in teaching an LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum, LGBTQ+ identities and experiences, and supporting a pupil coming out as LGBTQ+.

This report highlights the urgent need for primary school staff to be resourced with the knowledge, skills and confidence needed to ensure that every primary school in Ireland is a safe and supportive environment for all pupils, including LGBTQ+ pupils. At the end of this report, a number of recommendations are included for policymakers and schools to make this a reality.

For us at *Belong To*, *Belong To Primary* not only sheds new light on the experience, attitudes, knowledge levels, practices and professional needs of primary school staff regarding LGBTQ+ inclusivity. This research also marks the next step in our journey towards ensuring that LGBTQ+ young people in every corner of Ireland can feel safe and supported in their homes, schools and communities.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank the research team from the University of Limerick, Dr. Aoife Neary (she/her) and Dr. Jason Power (he/him), for their dedication and careful consideration of this research project over the past 18 months.

Together, we can create a brighter, safer Ireland for LGBTQ+ youth - an Ireland where every young person feels equal, safe and valued.



Moninne Griffith
Moninne Griffith (she/her)
CEO, *Belong To*

Key Findings

Among primary school staff who participated in this research:



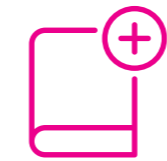
9 in 10

believe it is important for those working in primary schools to know about LGBTQ+ inclusivity.



57%

have never taken part in LGBTQ+ specific professional development.



85%

think that LGBTQ+ characters should be included in primary lessons in the same way as heterosexual characters.



1 in 3

teaching staff never use books and resources with LGBTQ+ people represented.



80%

feel comfortable with a pupil coming out as LGBTQ+.



56%

either have no formal school supports for a pupil who comes out as LGBTQ+, or are unsure of whether such supports are in place.



91%

think that primary school pupils should learn about LGBTQ+ anti-bullying



44%

heard pupils make subtle derogatory jokes or comments about LGBTQ+ people.

1. Higgins A; Downes C; O'Sullivan K; de Vries J; Molloy R; Monahan M; Keogh B; Doyle L; Begley T; Corcoran P; (2024) *The National Study on the Mental Health and Wellbeing of the LGBTQ+ Communities in Ireland*. Dublin: *Belong To*.

About Belong To Primary

This research is funded by an Irish Research Council ‘New Foundations: Engaging Civil Society’ grant, enabling a research partnership between the School of Education, University of Limerick and Belong To – LGBTQ+ Youth Ireland.

This research project encompassed two strands: a survey with primary school staff, and qualitative interviews with the parents of primary school-aged children who identify as LGBTQ+, and parents who themselves identify as LGBTQ+ and have children in primary school.

Taken together, these two strands provide a rich and comprehensive overview of what LGBTQ+ inclusion looks like today in Irish primary schools - relating to the experiences of both primary staff and LGBTQ+ families within primary school communities.

The full report contains the findings from both of the above strands. A copy of the full report is available on belongto.org. Our Key Survey Findings report details some of the headline findings from the survey conducted with primary staff.

The *Belong To Primary* survey asked staff employed in primary schools across Ireland about their experience, attitudes, knowledge levels, practices and professional needs regarding LGBTQ+ inclusivity, and was conducted online from March to May 2023.

To obtain a representative sample of primary school staff nationally, the survey was distributed via the Department of Education database of contact point email addresses to all 3,231 primary schools in Ireland, to major school management bodies and advertised via the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation (INTO).

To clearly situate the research findings within an educational policy context, the report is arranged in accordance with the four key areas of wellbeing promotion:² Relationships and Partnerships; Culture and Environment; Curriculum (Teaching and Learning); and Policy and Planning.

To reference this document, please use the following citation: Neary, A. and Power, J. (2024) *Belong To Primary: Key Survey Findings*. Research Report. Dublin: Belong To and University of Limerick.

Who responded to the survey?

The final sample consists of **1,031 primary school staff**. This comfortably exceeded the minimum acceptable sample size of 382 required for a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5%.

LOCATION



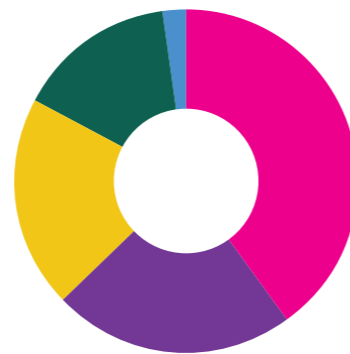
Suburban	32%
Rural	21%
Town	27%
City	20%

PRIMARY SCHOOL CAREER DURATION



< 5 years	14%
5-10 years	17%
11-15 years	19%
16-20 years	20%
21-25 years	14%
26-30 years	5%
31-35 years	6%
35+ years	5%

CURRENT ROLE



Mainstream Class Teacher	40%
Principal/Deputy Principal	23%
Special Class/Special Ed. Teacher	20%
Support Staff*	15%
Other**	2%

2. Department of Education and Skills (2018, revised 2019) *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018-2023)*. Dublin: Government of Ireland.

* Including Special Needs Assistant (SNA), Administrative or Secretarial Worker, Language Support Teacher, Home School Community Liaison (HSCL).

** Including Board of Management Member, Substitute Teacher, Caretaker or Cleaner, Retired Teacher, Student Teacher.

Relationships and Partnerships

A large majority of primary staff feel comfortable with a pupil identifying as LGBTQ+. In open-ended responses, many participants were keen to express that their concerns about a pupil coming out as LGBTQ+ existed within the context of a lack of supports and knowledge, as opposed to the fact of the pupil identifying as LGBTQ+.

LGBTQ+ MEMBERS OF THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

- 80% of primary staff feel comfortable with a pupil coming out as LGBTQ+.
- 85% of primary staff feel comfortable with a pupil coming out as lesbian, gay or bisexual.
- 75% of primary staff feel comfortable with a pupil coming out as trans or non-binary.
- 85% of primary staff feel comfortable with a colleague coming out as LGBTQ+.
- 84% of primary staff feel comfortable with a pupil’s parent or guardian coming out as LGBTQ+.



The reason why I would feel somewhat comfortable and not fully comfortable is because I know our school is not set up to support a child effectively in this situation”

Culture and Environment

Throughout primary staff’s responses to open-ended questions, the topic of school ethos arose regularly in the context of LGBTQ+ inclusivity within their school’s culture and environment. Ethos was referenced across a range of areas, such as curriculum, teaching materials, discussion of LGBTQ+ topics in class and supporting an LGBTQ+ pupil coming out.

SCHOOL ETHOS AND LGBTQ+ INCLUSIVITY

2 in 5 primary school staff feel that their school ethos has an impact on LGBTQ+ inclusivity.

Further detail provided in open-ended responses gave an interesting mix of opinions.

While some primary staff felt that their school ethos acted as a real or perceived barrier to visible and proactive LGBTQ+ inclusivity, others viewed the open and accepting values of their ethos to be very much in line with LGBTQ+ inclusivity.



A staff member suggested purchasing books that included characters who identify as LGBT and other staff members felt we couldn’t as it went against the Catholic ethos of the school.”

Curriculum (Teaching and Learning)

The findings show an overwhelming proportion of primary staff believe that it is important for themselves and their colleagues to be aware of LGBTQ+ inclusivity, and to represent LGBTQ+ identities in their teaching. However, a lack of confidence and knowledge relating to LGBTQ+ inclusive practice poses a barrier to many primary school staff. Staff training and a curriculum which specifically names LGBTQ+ identities and topics are identified as key supports needed by primary staff to overcome this barrier.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS LGBTQ+ INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

- 9 in 10 primary school staff believe it is important for primary staff, including principals, deputy principals, class teachers, special needs assistants and support staff, to know about LGBTQ+ inclusivity.
- 87% of primary school staff feel primary lessons should include same-gender parented families in the same way as different-gender parented families.
- 85% of primary school staff think that LGBTQ+ characters should be included in primary lessons in the same way as heterosexual characters.

CONFIDENCE IN TEACHING

- 1 in 4 primary staff do not feel confident in knowing how to plan LGBTQ+ inclusive lessons.
- 1 in 4 primary staff do not feel confident teaching SPHE/RSE in an LGBTQ+ inclusive way.
- 17% of primary staff do not feel confident in using LGBTQ+ inclusive language.

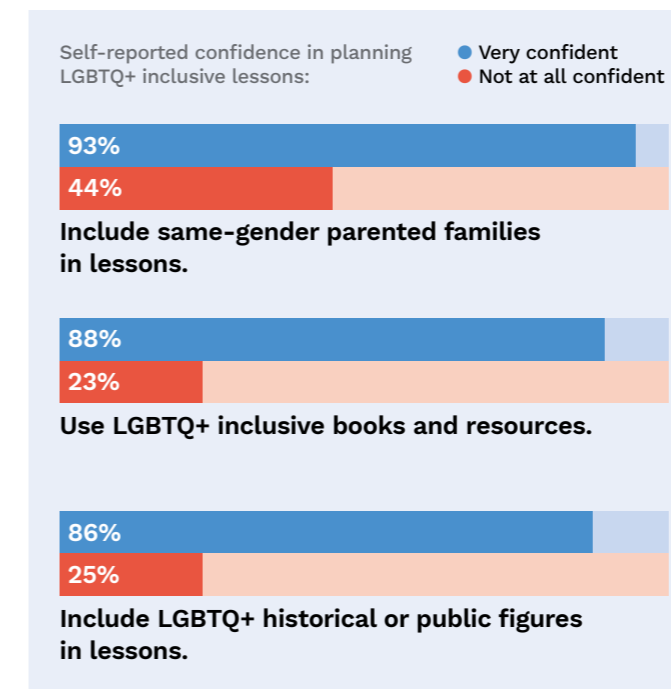
LGBTQ+ INCLUSIVE PRACTICE

- 68% of primary staff never organise LGBTQ+ inclusive activities such as an LGBT campaign, guest speakers or engaging expertise on sexual orientation and gender.
- 1 in 4 primary teaching staff never teach SPHE/RSE in an LGBTQ+ inclusive way.
- 1 in 3 primary teaching staff never use books and resources with LGBTQ+ people represented.
- 4 in 5 primary teaching staff include LGBTQ+ parented families when talking about families.

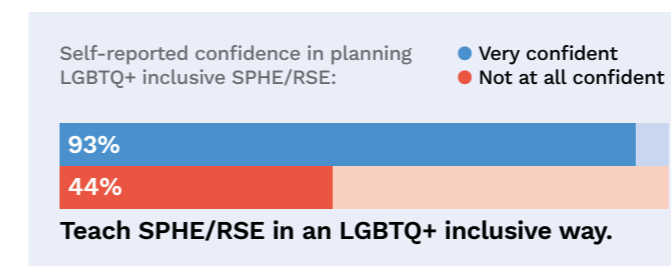
“I feel that until LGBT+ issues and topics are outlined in the curriculum, we can't teach them safely yet. Teachers won't teach something that's not on the curriculum. Principals won't put themselves out there unless they have to.”

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICE

The below chart shows that primary teaching staff who feel more confident in planning LGBTQ+ inclusive lessons are far more likely to represent LGBTQ+ identities and experiences in the classroom than those who lack this confidence. This is despite 85% of all primary staff surveyed supporting the inclusion of LGBTQ+ characters in primary lessons.



Primary teaching staff who feel more confident in teaching LGBTQ+ inclusive SPHE/RSE are far more likely to report that their SPHE/RSE lessons are LGBTQ+ inclusive.



“The lack of resources and books and RSE/SPHE materials is a really massive issue. The lack of visibility of different relationships and family types makes it seem like they don't exist.”

“I think we are all a little unsure around the SPHE/ RSE side of things when it comes to LGBTQ+. I think the curriculum is outdated, and does not address many of the questions and issues that arise during these lessons.”

Policy and Planning

While primary school staff feel very comfortable with a pupil coming out as LGBTQ+, there remains a significant gap in supports available to LGBTQ+ pupils who come out at school. Similarly, although the majority feel that pupils should learn about LGBTQ+ anti-bullying, this is not reflected in primary staff's school anti-bullying policy or confidence in teaching this area.

COMING OUT AT SCHOOL

- 80% of primary staff feel comfortable with a pupil coming out to them as LGBTQ+.
- 3 in 10 primary staff feel very confident in knowing what to do if a pupil comes out as LGBTQ+.
- 37% of primary staff feel very confident in knowing what to do if a pupil came out about their sexual orientation.
- 24% of primary staff feel very confident in knowing what to do if a pupil came out as trans or non-binary.
- 1 in 4 primary staff feel very confident in knowing what to do if a pupil wants to socially transition at school.

COMING OUT SUPPORTS

- 56% of primary staff either have no formal school supports for a pupil who comes out as LGBTQ+, or are unsure of whether such supports are in place.
- 57% of primary staff have never taken part in LGBTQ+ specific professional development.
- Only 1 in 3 primary staff feel very confident in their knowledge of LGBTQ+ identities.
- 1 in 4 primary staff do not feel confident in their knowledge of gender identity.



“We listen and accept what they say and, in our classes we do our best to help them feel included and to ensure they are looked after. However officially there is no support.”



There is no support structure in place. It would be down to the teacher involved”

LGBTQ+ ANTI-BULLYING

- 9 in 10 primary staff say that primary pupils should learn about LGBTQ+ anti-bullying.
- 57% of primary staff feel confident in teaching about LGBTQ+ anti-bullying

ANTI-LGBTQ+ REMARKS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

- 44% of primary staff hear pupils make subtle derogatory jokes or comments about LGBTQ+ people.
- 3 in 10 primary staff only sometimes intervene when overhearing subtle, derogatory jokes or comments about LGBTQ+ people.
- 55% of primary staff hear pupils in their school make statements such as “that’s so gay”.

ANTI-BULLYING PROCEDURES FOR PRIMARY AND POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Since 2013, the Department of Education *Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* – Circular 45/2013 – has required all primary schools to explicitly name homophobic and transphobic bullying in their anti-bullying policy, along with education and prevention strategies to tackle these. However, over a decade on, a significant proportion of primary staff are not aware of whether their school fulfils this requirement.

- 1 in 3 primary staff either did not know whether their school’s anti-bullying policy mentioned homophobic and transphobic bullying, or reported that this was not included in the policy.
- 3 in 10 primary staff reported that their school’s anti-bullying policy mentioned transphobic bullying.
- Half of primary staff reported that their school’s anti-bullying policy included information on education and/or prevention strategies relating to homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying.



Homophobia and transphobia are prevalent in bullying behaviour especially as they become older. Despite a lot of education and an open and inclusive staff, pupils are still targeted with homophobic and transphobic remarks and comments.”

Recommendations

The *Belong To Primary* survey indicates that there is a strong willingness among primary school staff to be inclusive in their practice. However, a lack of confidence, knowledge and clear guidance has emerged as a clear barrier to primary schools being LGBTQ+ inclusive in a visible and proactive way.

POLICYMAKERS

TEACHER EDUCATION

- **Integrate** LGBTQ+ awareness and inclusivity in undergraduate and postgraduate teacher-education programmes.
- **Provide** comprehensive Continued Professional Development (CPD) on LGBTQ+ awareness and identities to all primary staff, both teaching and non-teaching.
- **Invest** in the development of tailored professional development courses on specific areas of LGBTQ+ inclusivity as related to named policies and procedures, including on the areas of anti-bullying, coming out and social transition at school.
- **Encourage** school leadership, including principals, deputy principals and Board of Management members, to take part in LGBTQ+ inclusivity training.

FOSTERING LGBTQ+ SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE PRIMARY SCHOOLS

- **Fund** initiatives, similar to Belong To's LGBTQ+ Quality Mark for post-primary schools, which take a holistic approach to whole-school community LGBTQ+ inclusivity at primary level.
- **Engage** parents in LGBTQ+ inclusive work at primary level, including the provision of evidence-based information on the importance and impact of fostering an open and inclusive environment.
- **Resource** primary staff to foster sustainable LGBTQ+ inclusive practice through ongoing training, policy development and local information-sharing networks.

POLICY REVIEW

- **Implement** Action 2.11 of *Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying* by reviewing and updating the SPHE/RSE curriculum across primary schools to ensure that it includes, in an age-appropriate manner, LGBTQ+ identities.
- **Retain** the specific naming of homophobic and transphobic bullying upon updating the *Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools*, as per action 3.3 of *Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying*.
- **Engage** with primary schools and the Inspectorate to ensure that, as per the existing *Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* (Circular 45/2013), all primary schools explicitly name homophobic and transphobic bullying in their anti-bullying policy, along with education and prevention strategies to tackle the same, and that all school staff are aware of these inclusions.
- **Prioritise** the implementation of Action 3.6 of *Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying* by developing and publishing an updated version of the *Being LGBT in School* resource, with consideration of the provision of guidelines for primary schools.
- **Develop** clear guidelines for primary schools, grounded in Irish equality law and taking a rights-based approach, on LGBTQ+ inclusivity and its interaction with school ethos.
- **Include** outstanding actions under Objective 1 of the *LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy 2018-2020* in the new national LGBTQ+ inclusion strategy.

PRIMARY SCHOOLS

POLICY AND PROCEDURES

- **Ensure** the school anti-bullying policy:
 1. outlines bullying education and prevention strategies, and
 2. explicitly addresses homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying.
- **Communicate** school policies, particularly the anti-bullying policy, to staff, pupils, parents, guardians and carers regularly.
- **Implement** clear procedures for pupils and parents to report instances of harassment or discriminatory treatment by school staff.
- **Adopt** a school-wide zero-tolerance approach to homophobic, transphobic and biphobic remarks by recognising, intervening in and reporting all instances of such remarks.
- **Enact** education and prevention strategies to address homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying, as detailed in the school anti-bullying policy.

STAFF ACTIONS

- **Facilitate** and encourage all school staff to take part in education and training on LGBTQ+ awareness, identities and experiences.
- **Include** LGBTQ+ identities and experiences across the school curriculum, in the library and in teaching resources.

STUDENT SUPPORTS

- **Engage** the school community, including parents, in reviewing what more the school could do to support LGBTQ+ pupils, staff members and parents.
- **Develop** strong relationships with local LGBTQ+ support services, including Belong To's national Family Support Service, to facilitate referral pathways for parents, guardians, carers and pupils who require additional support.



CPD (Continued Professional Development) needed to understand terms and language. CPD needed to know what supports children can be referred to. CPD needed to work with parents in bringing LGBTQ+ to the classroom as parents will have strong opinions on either side.”



Changes need to come from the top down – or else small efforts made by individual teachers will be lost and not continued from class to class.”

Belong To is a national organisation supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ+) youth. Since 2003, Belong To has worked with LGBTQ+ young people to create a world where they are equal, safe and thriving. The organisation advocates and campaigns on behalf of young LGBTQ+ people and offers a specialised LGBTQ+ youth service including crisis counselling, information and the provision of LGBTQ+ youth groups.

Belong To supports educators and schools across Ireland. Stand Up Awareness Week, now in its 15th year, is an opportunity for educators and schools across Ireland to avail of teacher training and second-level school resources. Belong To's LGBTQ+ Quality Mark initiative supports second-level schools by helping them to create environments that are fully inclusive of LGBTQ+ youth. To find out more, visit belongto.org



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