

# Safe spaces and beyond: Examining the role of LGBT+ Pride Groups in fostering ontological security and allyship within UK schools

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## Abstract

This paper explores the critical role that safe spaces, or 'Pride Groups', can play in developing ontological security and allyship within schools. Drawing on data collected from eight UK secondary schools and one college, the research evaluates the impact of these groups, using an innovative theoretical framework combining Meyer's minority stress model with Giddens' concept of ontological security. The research addresses a significant and notable gap in UK-based Pride Groups literature, as these groups are more commonly studied in the US context. The findings demonstrate that such groups provide essential safe spaces, fostering personal development, emotional wellbeing and broader school inclusion. Moreover, this study adds depth to existing research by examining the logistical and ideological challenges of running Pride Groups, such as the negotiation of group membership and the tension between inclusivity and safety. These insights contribute to an original and deeper understanding of inclusive policy and practice, revealing how educational environments can be transformed into spaces of safety for LGBT+ students.

## KEYWORDS

LGBT+, Pride Groups, safe spaces, schools

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## Key insights

### What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

Schools are often experienced as heteronormative spaces, which can leave LGBT+ students feeling isolated or marginalised. This paper explores the role of Pride Groups in UK schools and highlights their potential to foster inclusion, positive mental wellbeing and allyship.

### What are the main insights that the paper provides?

Pride Groups can significantly enhance emotional wellbeing, identity exploration and school inclusion for LGBT+ students. Pride Groups also have the potential to transform school culture through empowering students and fostering allyship. However, these important benefits are contingent on wider school support and a holistic approach to inclusion.

## INTRODUCTION

Schools are produced as spaces that centre and privilege heterosexual, cisgender identities (Atkinson & DePalma, 2009; Brett, 2024b; Johnson, 2023; Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021; Lundin, 2016); consequently, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT+) students often experience feelings of discomfort, anxiety or distress from being marginalised or treated as outsiders within a school's social structure (Bradlow et al., 2017; Lee, 2020).

The significance of this paper derives from analysis of the vital role that LGBT+ safe spaces, or 'Pride Groups', can play in supporting LGBT+ students and developing wider allyship, and even activism, within a school. The paper also explores some of the tensions that can arise in creating these spaces. The paper draws upon rigorous and in-depth research conducted with eight secondary schools and one college across England and Wales by the University of Derby over the period of a year for the LGBT+ young people's charity Just Like Us, to monitor and evaluate the impact of their Pride Groups programme. The research aimed to answer two key research questions: What impact do LGBT+ Pride Groups have on the students that attend them? and What impact can LGBT+ Pride Groups have in developing allyship within a school?

Founded in 2016, Just Like Us is a UK charity supporting schools to develop their LGBT+ inclusion; they provide a variety of programmes and events, such as School Diversity Week, School Talks, Ambassador Programmes and, the focus of this research, LGBT+ Pride Groups. The charity supports schools in setting up and running Pride Groups, offering continuing professional development (CPD), resources and training. Pride Groups are designed to be inclusive spaces within a school, where LGBT+ young people can explore their identities in a safe environment and develop a sense of community. Just Like Us recognises the phenomenal impact Pride Groups can have but are also aware of the challenges that staff can face in setting up and successfully running such groups.

This paper makes an original contribution to the significant gap in the UK Pride Groups literature and innovatively combines Giddens' (1991) concept of ontological security, which deals with the stability and coherence of one's sense of identity, with Meyer's (2003) minority stress model, which looks at the distinct stressors faced by LGBT+ people, to present a unique lens to examine the importance of safe spaces for young people. The paper argues

that spaces specifically designed for LGBT+ students create vital and transformative opportunities for safety and growth, as well as conferring wider school benefits, such as the development of inclusion and allyship. Furthermore, the paper examines some of the challenges of successfully developing and running a Pride Group, exploring the tensions that can arise in defining what a Pride Group is and who it is for.

## PRIDE GROUPS LITERATURE

With an increasing number of young people identifying as LGBT+ (Stonewall, 2022), significant reductions in UK youth services (McManus, 2024) and declining mental health for LGBT+ young people (Just Like Us, 2021), Pride Groups have become increasingly prominent to provide safe and supportive spaces for LGBT+ students. While UK literature on this topic is extremely limited, there is a breadth of research from the US context examining the critical role that Pride Groups can play in supporting marginalised students and developing wider forms of allyship. Pride Groups are clubs that are traditionally run at lunch time or after school to provide safe spaces for LGBT+ students and allies to socialise, learn and access support. Although a fixture in US schools as far back as the late 1980s (originally called Gay Straight Alliances, now more commonly referred to as GSAs—Gender Sexuality Alliances), Pride Groups are a relatively recent initiative within UK schools.

The existing literature recognises the already well-researched view that schools are often difficult spaces for LGBT+ young people. The literature further examines the significant impact that safe spaces, or Pride Groups, can have for both the LGBT+ students that attend the groups, as well as the wider school community. These benefits include reduced psychological distress (Kosciw et al., 2022), reduced bullying and victimisation (Poteat et al., 2017), improved school engagement and academic achievement (Black et al., 2012) and safer and more supportive school environments (Day et al., 2020). The GLSEN National School Climate Survey (Kosciw et al., 2022), the biggest survey of its kind, further reports that LGBT+ students in schools with GSAs experienced greater belonging to their school community and were more likely to plan on pursuing postsecondary education. They also reported higher levels of self-esteem, lower levels of depression and a lower likelihood of having seriously considered suicide in the past year.

The GLSEN report (Kosciw et al., 2022) also identifies some challenges and draws attention to the fact that only a third of students said their schools had a GSA or similar club, and for those that did, only half of LGBT+ students said they attended the group. The broader literature also provides a necessary nuance in recognising the additional challenges that can be experienced within the LGBT+ community. For example, identifying the unique forms of discrimination that transgender students (Greytak et al., 2016), Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) students (Matasovska, 2023) and students of colour (Baams & Russell, 2021) may experience, raising important questions about the tailored support these students may need.

The literature further examines the impact that Pride Groups can have in developing allyship within the school body (Fetner & Elafros, 2015; Kosciw et al., 2022; Lapointe, 2015), with most studies illustrating greater levels of understanding, acceptance and inclusion in schools with a GSA compared to those without. Although improvements in wider school culture are something to be lauded, it does raise questions about what the purpose of a Pride Group is and who it is for.

Formby and Woodiwiss (2023) have written most extensively on the subject of Pride Groups within the United Kingdom and, as well as recognising the huge benefits of having LGBT+ groups in schools, they similarly acknowledge some of these challenges:

Key to the value and effectiveness of such groups is who organises and runs them, the degree to which the school supports the groups and their activities, and who they are perceived to be for. Whilst these groups can be beneficial, they can also be seen as schools merely paying 'lip service' to the needs of their LGBT+ students, and there can be considerably divergent views between school staff and students.

(Formby & Woodiwiss, 2023, p. 44)

Formby and Woodiwiss's (2023) research examines the many benefits that Pride Groups can provide for LGBT+ young people, such as learning beyond the formal curriculum, community-building and social and emotional support. They also acknowledge the tension that can exist in providing a safe space for LGBT+ young people that is also open to students who may not be LGBT+ but wish to be allies to the community, as explored later.

## METHODOLOGY

### Method

The University of Derby was appointed by Just Like Us to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of their Pride Groups programme, which they were expanding over a 3-year period supported by The National Lottery Community Fund. The research aimed to answer two key questions:

- What impact do LGBT+ Pride Groups have on the students that attend them?
- What impact can LGBT+ Pride Groups have in developing allyship within a school?

The university presented a study design for Just Like Us's approval to address these questions, which involved working with eight secondary schools and one college over the 3-year period. The study would collect data in the form of interviews with staff, focus groups with students (both members of the Pride Group and students in the wider school) and observation of Pride Group sessions. This approach would allow a triangulation of data to understand individual experiences, and to examine the wider impact that Pride Groups can have. Each of the nine schools and college were part of the Just Like Us Pride Groups programme; some had recently set up their group, and others were well established. In consultation with the University of Derby, Just Like Us emailed Pride Group leaders from a broad variety of contexts to invite them and their schools to take part in the research. Interested schools had an initial online meeting with the University of Derby researcher (author of this paper) to discuss their potential involvement in the project, which would involve receiving a minimum of two in-person visits from the researcher each year. The initial visits were an opportunity for the students and staff to get to know the researcher and learn more about the project. Details of the participating schools can be found in [Table 1](#).

The researcher was a former secondary school teacher and leader with expertise in LGBT+ inclusion, and so the students and school were reassured that the research would be conducted sensitively and with an appreciation of the school's time and commitment. The researcher engaged in reflexive practice throughout, understanding that although their experience provided valuable insights into the challenges faced by LGBT+ young people, it could also influence interpretations. To address this, the researcher adopted a non-intrusive role when observing the Pride Groups and critically reflected on assumptions through detailed field notes and discussions with respected colleagues at the university. Follow-up

TABLE 1 List of participating schools.

School pseudonym	Location	Age range	Number of students
Red College	East Midlands	14 to 18	250+
Red School	East Midlands	11 to 18	1500+
Orange School	South Wales	11 to 18	1500+
Yellow School	South Wales	11 to 18	1000+
Blue School	East Midlands	11 to 16	1000+
Green School	West Midlands	11 to 18	1000+
Pink School	Greater Manchester	11 to 18	750+
Purple School	Bristol	11 to 16	1000+
Violet School	Yorkshire	11 to 18	1000+

questions were asked in focus groups and interviews to encourage detail, addressing the risk of participants assuming a shared understanding with the researcher.

The schools that took part were all mixed comprehensives (state-funded secondary schools that accept students of all abilities and backgrounds), apart from Pink School, which was a grammar (also state-funded but a school that selects students based on academic ability). Yellow School was a Welsh-speaking school, although their Pride Group was conducted in English (the challenges of discussing LGBT+ identities in the Welsh language will be explored in a future paper). Data was collected through observation of the Pride Groups, interviews with staff who run the groups and, for the first year, focus groups with students who attended them (students in the wider school community would be invited to take part in years 2 and 3). Topic guides for the interviews and focus groups were developed to address the key research questions, seeking to understand how the Pride Groups operated in each school, their impact on the students attending them, the context of the Pride Group in the wider school and the impact on wider school culture. A list of questions was designed to guide the conversations, although these were used in a semi-structured way to allow participants to share what they felt was important to them. Interviews with staff varied in length from 10 to 30 min, and focus groups lasted an average of an hour. All research was conducted in person and the researcher recorded notes of their reflections and observations during the Pride Groups and made audio recordings of the interviews and focus groups, which were deleted once accurate transcriptions had been made. All data was securely stored on the university's server, and participants had until the end of each academic year to withdraw their data if they chose to. All data reported in this paper uses pseudonyms for each school and student to ensure anonymity.

## Ethics and analysis

Ethical approval for the research was granted by the University of Derby. Given the nature of the study, a key ethical consideration was the safety of the young people taking part. Students ranged from ages 11–18 and, as such, written permission from a parent or guardian was required for those who were 11–16. It was decided that parental permission would also be sought for those 16–18 to ensure ethical consistency for both the university and the schools involved. The consent letter was worded to ensure parents were informed about the research their child was taking part in, although—to avoid potentially outing students to their parents—the research was described in broader terms about diversity and developing allyship. Students were made fully aware of the nature of the study and

presented with an information sheet and debrief letter. Students were given the option to sign a consent form or to verbally assent if they preferred—verbal assent was most commonly used for the Pride Group observations and was gained by the school before the researcher visited, and again by the researcher once they had introduced themselves to the group. Each headteacher provided written consent for their school to take part in the research, understanding that although the intended commitment was 3 years, they could withdraw at any time.

Due to the paucity of UK Pride Groups literature, this paper was written at the end of the first year of data collection. Future papers will explore the full findings from years 2 and 3; however, data from the first year reveals important considerations for policy and practice that schools must prioritise. This paper draws upon research collected from the initial Pride Group observations with each of the nine schools and college; interviews with the Pride Group leaders; and three focus groups with students from Red College and Blue School, whose Pride Group had been running for several years, and Yellow School, whose Pride Group had been running for 6 months.

## DISCUSSION

### Theoretical framework

The concepts of minority stress and ontological security form a theoretical lens that is employed to explore the experiences, and therefore needs, of the participants in this study. These concepts have been synthesised as they provide a theoretical rigour which powerfully makes sense of the feelings of in/security, un/certainty and dis/comfort that many of the participants shared within their stories. The framework is also used to conceptualise the benefits, such as safety and wellbeing, that can result from LGBT+ students feeling comfortable in their environment.

Meyer's (2003) minority stress model explores the unique forms of stress that members of the lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) community may experience in society as a result of stigma, prejudice and discrimination. These additional forms of stress can result in higher-than-average negative mental health outcomes within the LGB community.

One elaboration of social stress theory may be referred to as minority stress to distinguish the excess stress to which individuals from stigmatized social categories are exposed as a result of their social, often a minority, position.

(Meyer, 2003, p. 3)

Meyer (2003) highlights that minority stress is distinctive, recognising that all people experience general stressors—the stress inherent to the human condition, particularly for young people in school—but that members of minority groups experience additional forms of stress that are both unique and socially based. Meyer (2003) distinguishes between distal stressors and proximal stressors, with distal referring to prejudice events such as discrimination and violence, and proximal stressors describing an internalisation of these events which may result in expectations of rejection, a delayed sense of development, or internalised homophobia. Both distal and proximal stressors were evident in the narratives shared by participants; some described specific incidents where they had seen or experienced discrimination, and others described expectations of prejudice, which lead to feelings of anxiety and the modifying of behaviours.

Participants also spoke of the transformative power of having access to LGBT+ inclusive spaces, describing significant social and mental health benefits from socialising with

members of the LGBT+ community. Meyer identifies that minority status is associated not only with stress but also with important resilience factors such as group solidarity and cohesiveness that protect minority members from the adverse mental health effects of minority stress (Meyer, 2003, p. 6). Meyer posits that LGB identity can be a source of strength when associated with opportunities for affiliation, social support and coping, describing these as 'stress-ameliorating factors'.

The concept of minority stress continues to be built upon by scholars to consider the additional forms of minority stressors that trans and gender-diverse (TGD) populations may face, as distinct from the experiences of LGB populations. Testa et al. (2015) have built upon Meyer's (2003) work with the development of the Gender Minority Stress and Resilience (GMSR) measure, highlighting additional distal stressors that TGD people may experience, described as 'non-affirmation'. Relevant examples to this research include non-affirmation of gender identity and gender-related rejection or discrimination. They similarly highlight resilience factors, described as community connectedness and pride.

Diamond and Alley (2022) further build upon the work of Meyer (2003), asserting that the absence of 'social safety' may have a more profound impact on individual wellbeing than the presence of minority stress, and that chronic 'threat-vigilance', which speaks to Meyer's description of proximal stress, is exacerbated by insufficient social safety. Diamond and Alley (2022) describe social safety as 'reliable social connection, social belongingness, social inclusion, social recognition and social protection' (p. 1). The concept of Giddens' (1991) ontological security is here employed to examine the importance of social safety.

Giddens (1991) builds upon the work of Laing ([1969] 2010) to develop the sociological concept of ontological security. This theory is valuable to conceptualise the crucial role that safe spaces can play within an LGBT+ person's life. Giddens (1991) describes ontological security as the sense of continuity and stability in one's identity and existence that comes from being grounded in a society and world that is both predictable and ordered. Giddens (1991) argues that people seek to construct a coherent narrative in their lives as this provides them with a feeling of stability and reassurance, allowing them to 'bracket out' anxieties. Giddens (1991) further argues that mundane, routine aspects of day-to-day life play a vital role in providing individuals with a sense of coherence and preventing them from being overwhelmed.

On the other side of what might appear to be quite trivial aspects of day-to-day action and discourse, chaos lurks. And this chaos is not just disorganisation, but the loss of a sense of the very reality of things and of other persons.

(Giddens, 1991, p. 36)

Crucial to developing a sense of ontological security, or 'biographical continuity' (Giddens, 1991, p. 54), is the creation of a reliable sense of self-identity, which can be established and supported through routines, relationships and a stable environment. Self-identity is something LGBT+ young people often experience a delay in developing due to the significant identity stress (Valentine et al., 2003) they may experience in school. Pride Groups can be an essential resource in this context, as they offer students a reliable space to explore and validate their sexual or gender identity and engage in meaningful interactions without judgement. However, it may also be difficult for LGBT+ young people to construct a coherent narrative around their identity if they have to negotiate the visibility of their identity (Brett, 2024a) outside of the Pride Group, which demonstrates the need for protective factors (Diamond & Alley, 2022) such as wider forms of allyship and social connection within school.

Giddens (1991) states that people need to feel a sense of predictability and safety in their social interactions to experience ontological security, explaining that the ontologically insecure often struggle to sustain a continuous narrative about themselves, which can lead to

feeling overwhelmed. The ontologically insecure can become obsessively preoccupied with apprehension of possible risks to their existence, which speaks to Meyer's (2003) description of proximal stress. Giddens (1991) explains how this can lead to people trying to 'blend with their environment' so as to escape being the targets of danger, which for LGBT+ people can look like code-switching behaviour (Wargo & Katz, 2024) to meet an invisible heteronormative expectation. One student explained how the Pride Group was often the only place they could truly 'unmask'.

Meyer's minority stress model presents several contributing factors that can lead to LGB people experiencing positive or negative mental health outcomes; crucial to this study are the factors of 'coping and social support' and 'characteristics of minority identity', the latter describing 'the prominence of minority identity in the person's sense of self' (p. 6). Characteristics of minority identity can be read through Giddens' imperative that people need to develop a stable sense of self-identity to cope with the stresses and challenges of life. The following description is significant when examined through the perspective of young LGBT+ people:

A person with a reasonably stable sense of self-identity has a feeling of biographical continuity which she is able to grasp reflexively and, to a greater or lesser degree, communicate to other people. That person also, through early trust relations, has established a protective cocoon which 'filters out', in the practical conduct of day-to-day life, many of the dangers which in principle threaten the integrity of the self.

(Giddens, 1991, p. 54)

Pride Groups recognise the challenge of trust relations for LGBT+ young people, and through their safe environments, make space for students to explore and develop support networks and an identity that feels authentic to them.

## Findings

The data was thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2021) to address both the research questions, and to identify other themes of importance missing from the current literature. The process began with the researcher familiarising themselves with the field notes and transcript data, before creating codes to identify and collate common ideas and topics. Themes were then generated to address the research questions as well as highlight other important considerations. For example, the logistics of running a Pride Group was a common focus of discussion, and although it does not directly address the research questions, it has been included as a theme within this paper to ensure these important considerations are disseminated. Although this paper was shared and discussed with Just Like Us prior to submission, it was written with the intention of sharing as accurately as possible the authentic voices and experiences of those involved. Just Like Us was happy for this paper to be published in the form it was presented to them, and the only changes they requested were grammatical (e.g., the capitalisation of Pride Groups).

Due to the small number of focus groups used within this initial paper, data saturation was not reached, highlighting the need for future publications from this research as it progresses. The initial findings draw upon focus groups with four Year 12 students at Red College, six Year 8 students at Blue School and five Year 11 students at Yellow School, with pseudonyms for the students used throughout.

Findings from the research are here explored under the themes 'Logistics of running a Pride Group'; 'Impact on LGBT+ students'; 'Allyship and advocacy'; and 'Challenges and



opportunities'. Each section analyses the data with reference to the existing literature and employs the work of Giddens (1991) and Meyer (2003) to examine the positive role that Pride Groups can play in reducing stress and developing ontological security through social safety.

## Logistics of running a Pride Group

The leaders of the Pride Groups spoke at length about the logistical challenges of setting up and maintaining the momentum of their groups, particularly as most of them were full-time teachers. The Pride Groups were different in each school, with the majority being run at lunch time or the end of the day, and at Violet School, in the afternoon as part of an elective 'enrichment' session. Some clubs were a space for students to socialise and eat their lunch, some had structured sessions and activities, and others played a more activist role, such as planning future events to improve LGBT+ inclusion in the school. All the Pride Groups were open to both LGBT+ students and allies, although in most schools the groups were largely or entirely comprised of LGBT+ students. Attendance varied, with most groups having around 10 students; however, Purple School and Yellow School had noticeably larger numbers of around 30, as explored later.

The time and location of the Pride Groups were a prominent point of discussion. One Pride Group leader at Green School explained that students had asked for their group to be at the end of the day and up on the second floor, as this would reduce the risk of other students seeing them attend the club. Being seen to attend the Pride Group was a fear some students raised, with one pupil at Green School commenting that in the past it had discouraged LGBT+ students and even allies from attending the group for fear they would be assumed to be LGBT+, which speaks to the heteronormativity commonplace in most schools (Brassington & Brett, 2023). Students' avoidance of the club for fear of being labelled or assumed to be LGBT+ exemplifies Meyer's (2003) description of distal stressors, where self-policing and code-switching behaviour (Wargo & Katz, 2024) become an automatic response in anticipation of discrimination. By placing the club in a space away from the gaze of others (Johnson, 2023), and at a time when students were less likely to be around, more students felt safe in attending the group as the potential for distal and proximal stressors was reduced. However, the need to carefully choose the time and location of the Pride Group reveals a larger tension; that schools are inherently unsafe spaces for many LGBT+ people. It is important for school leaders to apply the lens of Meyer's minority stress model when they are thinking about their approaches to inclusion. An absence of discrimination is often not enough for LGBT+ students and staff to feel safe in a school environment (Brett, 2025), highlighting the need for wider forms of social safety, rather than pockets of safety, as discussed later.

Although each Pride Group was run uniquely, what they crucially had in common through the lens of Giddens (1991) was their consistency; the groups were at the same time and in the same place each week, and the routine and predictability were highly valued by many pupils. For students, knowing they had a safe space and trusted adult to speak to each week provided the vital certainty and stability they required to develop their individual sense of ontological security and bracket out the anxieties that they experienced elsewhere in the school. One student commented that although they did not often attend the group, just knowing it was there made them feel safe. Another student described the impact that being part of a community had upon her:

*But I think the fun part is it's that, we're all kind of in it together. And if someone's had a bad day and it's Pride Club day, you get cheered up as soon as you walk into that room.*

(Lucy, Year 12, Red College)

Yellow School had begun their Pride Group, which they called Belonging Club, just 6 months prior to our first focus group. The group leader described the different ways the group was run to meet the varying needs of their students. Many of the students attending the group were about to sit their GCSEs and for them, the group was a safe space to both socialise and study for their exams; something they found difficult to do in other spaces in the school. Using Pride Groups for this purpose highlights Black et al.'s (2012) benefit of Pride Groups being valuable in improving school engagement and academic achievement. The group also wanted to be outward-facing and raise awareness of LGBT+ topics and issues in the school, which they successfully achieved through a badge initiative, as detailed later. One Year 11 student explained the impact the Belonging Club had on her when joining the secondary school:

*It made me feel better ... I thought the school would be homophobic. It's made me realise that not everybody's out to be mean all the time, so it's made me feel a lot better, because it's more positive than I expected.*

(Alys, Year 11, Yellow School)

The student's response provides a further example of proximal stress in her expectations of homophobic hostility when joining the school, as LGBT+ people often perceive or anticipate discrimination based upon past experiences or wider social narratives. The Belonging Club had been valuable in ameliorating this anxiety, allowing the student to feel more positive about her experience in the school. School leaders should seek to empower and learn from their Pride Groups to understand how the ontological security that students experience in these spaces can be cultivated for all students in the wider school environment. By shifting the base of power and engaging in co-construction, leaders can understand how to effectively meet all their students' needs.

## Impact on LGBT+ students

At the end of each focus group, students were asked to reflect upon what their Pride Group meant to them. Their responses reveal the impact these groups can have on wellbeing and personal development:

*A safe spot.*

(Alex, Year 8, Blue School)

*Just nice.*

(Jamie, Year 8, Blue School)

*A place I feel relaxed.*

(James, Year 8, Blue School)

*It's more or less like a place where you can just be yourself and not have to worry about being judged.*

(Ria, Year 12, Red College)

*Friendship.*

(Tim, Year 11, Yellow School)

*A safe space.*

(Sarah, Year 11, Yellow School)

*Here, I am a much more open person.*

(Alys, Year 11, Yellow School)

Each response speaks of the importance of the community students felt they were a part of, which, as highlighted by Kosciw et al. (2022), is one of the key benefits of an LGBT+ safe space. Pride Groups often function as support networks where students can find solidarity and develop friendships which can extend beyond the Pride Group, helping them feel less isolated. One Pride Group leader at Green School explained how important their space was in developing cross-year friendships that extended into the wider school. He described how students would often seek each other out at break and lunch times to socialise and provide support for each other. This can be examined through the lens of Meyer (2003), who identifies that minority stress can result from feeling isolated and not automatically recognising people 'like you' in a social space. The networks of support that students were able to develop in the Pride Groups are a valuable example of stress-ameliorating factors that can help reduce the impacts of minority stress. One Year 12 student spoke about how the Pride Group had allowed her to find 'her people'.

*I felt like I'd walked in there and found my people ... to put it nicely, we're all weirdos [laughs]. And I think the places where you feel where you can be weird, is the place where you feel most comfortable. I think LGBTQ+ people feel like they're weird from society, and then they go into that room, and they go 'these lot are weirdos' [laughs] ... and you go 'I'd like to sit in here'... and I've been there the whole time now, and I feel quite at home. It's the only reason I know some Y13s.*

(Natalie, Year 12, Red College)

The student's description of LGBT+ people feeling '*weird from society*' reflects a distal stressor (Meyer, 2003), where societal norms impose a sense of otherness on LGBT+ students, leading them to feel alienated. The quote also reveals the challenges that young people can experience in developing a coherent narrative about their personal identity, as they feel the need to modify the way they behave in accordance with a societal norm. In this space, the student was able to be herself and develop a crucial sense of community and identity, which, as Meyer (2003) and Xu et al. (2024) posit, is vital in ensuring positive mental health outcomes. The student spoke about how, since joining the club, she had felt more comfortable in talking about her sexuality and felt able to dress and behave in ways that felt authentic to her. She compared her current experience at college to a time when she was in Year 8 and had begun to share that she thought she may be bisexual. However, due to negative responses from peers and her family, she felt the need to go '*back into the closet*' for several years. Her reluctance to share her bisexuality and her withdrawal into secrecy reflects the proximal stressor of internalised stigma (Meyer, 2003). She explained that now she had a strong LGBT+ friendship group, she could manage the responses she felt unable to deal with when she was younger, and reflected on the strength this gave her as she thought about life after college. The student's experience illustrates the power of developing ontological security to 'weather major attentions or transitions in the social environments within which the person moves' (Giddens, 1991, p. 55). Transitions in this context can be thought of in terms of identity (coming out) or chrononormative life stages (e.g., going to university or getting a job).

In response to the question 'What does Pride Group mean to you?', one Year 8 student replied '*a place where I can be autistic freely*'. Blue School ran Pride Groups for different

key stages, with their 11–14 group organically becoming a space occupied mainly by LGBT+ neurodivergent students, as the young person explained:

*It's a quiet room to eat lunch and socialise with your friend group. A lot of us have auditory, sensory issues, so Pride Club is just like a quiet space, and we're all queer as well ... well a lot of us are queer and everyone is allies. I think it's because people who are neurodivergent struggle quite a lot with, like, social norms and stuff, and they don't like, feel the need to hide coming out and stuff.*

(Margot, Year 8, Blue School)

While the purpose of this paper is not to examine a link between SEND and LGBT+, through an intersectional lens the student described the important friendships she had been able to form with others who had a tacit understanding of the intersection. The Pride Group had removed many of the multiple social barriers that LGBT+ and SEND students experience (Matasovska, 2023), allowing the students to assimilate these different aspects of their identity and create a biographical coherence that was authentic to them, and also validated by others. Meyer (2003) speaks to the importance of this, stating that 'members of stigmatised groups who have a strong sense of community cohesiveness evaluate themselves in comparison with others who are like them rather than with members of the dominant culture' (p. 6). The Pride Group had acted as a protective buffer against both distal and proximal stressors. The friendships and support students such as Margot had found in these groups provided a powerful mechanism for coping. Students experiencing the freedom to be both LGBT+ and neurodivergent in this space demonstrates how these groups can reduce the need to conform to societal norms, which are often sources of minority stress.

Students in the Red College focus group explained how their Pride Group worked closely with their 'culture and diversity committee' to discuss initiatives and events that the college could run to celebrate intersectional diversity, recognising the importance of young people being able to construct an inclusive and whole identity that is recognised and 'comparable' with others. Formby and Woodiwiss (2023) take up this point, highlighting the need for schools to take an intersectional approach to inclusion, explaining how school staff may sometimes hold misinterpretations or a lack of understanding about students' multiple identities that include LGBT+. It is valuable here to return to Testa et al. (2015), to also recognise the multiple identities that exist within the LGBT+ community. TGD young people are likely to experience additional and unique stressors in school, such as which gendered facilities to use and non-affirmation of their gender identity. Schools must carefully consider these potential challenges when thinking about their approach to LGBT+ inclusion.

## Allyship and advocacy

Students spoke passionately about the teachers that ran or supported their groups and advocated for them. Group leaders were both teachers and support staff; some were members of the LGBT+ community, and others were LGBT+ allies. Students explained that the teachers worked hard to keep their groups running and at a regular time, especially during busy periods of the year such as exam season. They also explained how the group leaders acted as a buffer to keep the space a safe one, on occasion asking students to leave if they thought they were not using the space for the reasons it was intended, and sometimes speaking with other teachers if students had raised a concern. Students explained how important it was to have at least one person in the school who they knew would advocate strongly for them and the LGBT+ community.

The GSA literature (Kosciw et al., 2022) keenly highlights the impact Pride Groups can have in improving social attitudes and developing wider forms of allyship. Although there is a question to be raised about a marginalised group becoming responsible for their inclusion, there is no doubt from this research that with the right support and systems, Pride Groups can be a powerful and transformative force. Earlier in the paper, Yellow School's Pride Group was described for their desire to be outward-facing and to increase LGBT+ visibility in their school. The group had decided to run a stall at break and lunch time in the central corridor one day to advertise the club and discuss the topic of allyship. The group leader purchased a badge maker, and in Pride Club, the students produced 250 badges featuring the school logo on top of a rainbow Pride flag. The students explained how nervous they were about running the event, but they were motivated to do so as they wanted LGBT+ visibility to be prominent in the school and thought giving out badges was a good way to discuss the topic of allyship with students and staff. The teacher who ran the Pride Group explained how much the students' confidence grew during the success of the event, with all 250 badges being quickly taken and worn by staff and students.

The Pride Group explained how surprised they were when so many students who they thought would not be interested, or even hostile, came to the stall to ask what the group was about and took a badge that they had continued to wear. One student explained how they had tried to give a badge to a boy in Year 11, to which the student said *'no, no, I'm not gay'*. However, once the idea of allyship had been explained to the student, it opened a powerful conversation in which the boy started talking about his cousin who was gay; he then wanted to wear the badge as a symbol of his support. The Pride Group students described this moment as a *'big eye opener'* (Alison, Year 11) and a *'huge thing'* (Tim, Year 11), with one student commenting *'they're uncomfortable. 'Nobody wants to talk about it until like, it's brought up, and then they see, you know, it's not that bad, that it's okay'* (Alys, Year 11).

The students' descriptions reveal how heteronormativity can render LGBT+ topics silent and invisible (Brett, 2024b), removing the unspoken permission that LGBT+ people need to develop a coherent narrative about their identity. The students' descriptions also reveal that the proximal stress LGBT+ people can experience is often not found on 'accurate' information, but on a nebulous fear of discrimination that has become internalised over time. In disrupting heteronormativity through this public LGBT+ display, honest views were revealed, important conversations were had and the LGBT+ young people were briefly granted permission to affirm their identities (Tan et al., 2020). Through the lens of Giddens' (1991) ontological security, taking part in this public event marked a significant transition for the students. Through confronting their anxieties and publicly engaging with their peers and teachers, the students had transgressed from invisible and vulnerable subjects to agents of change within their school. The event had begun to develop new social norms around LGBT+ allyship and, crucially, allowed the LGBT+ students to experience positive self-acceptance. The students had gone on to perceive their school as less threatening and more supportive, therefore reducing the effects of proximal stress and strengthening their individual and group sense of identity.

The group leader explained the impact the event had on the senior leadership team as it raised the profile of LGBT+ inclusion in the school and allowed leaders to engage in a process of learning. Alison (Year 11) explained how their head teacher said: *'Can I have a badge for every one of my suits, that way I will never have to take it off!'*

Students smiled as they explained how much it meant to them to see their teachers and peers wearing the badges, and how in subsequent weeks they had seen an increase in allies attending the Pride Club.

In the Blue School, in response to some discrimination students had experienced, the Pride Group leaders had decided to run an assembly for all students on the topic of allyship. Rather than focusing on LGBT+ history and the deficit approach that can often be associated with this, they focused on positives and shared specific examples of how to be an ally

and support a person who may be exploring their gender or sexual identity. One student commented on the impact of this positive and practical assembly, compared to the usual assemblies that are given:

*But like with most of our assemblies are on like on queer history. It was good to have one where it was like how to be an ally rather than, here's everything that happened and why. It's just quite nice to see that we're not just talking about all the bad things that happened, like, just like there is a positive side to it as well.*

(Alex, Year 8, Blue School)

Meyer (2003) emphasises the role of *valence*, describing the importance of self-acceptance and diminishment of internalised homophobia, in determining positive mental health outcomes of LGB people. Through presenting positive LGBT+ narratives in their assembly, students from the Pride Group described how 'seen' they had been made to feel, and explained that after the assembly, friends had come up to them to discuss LGBT+ topics, for example, asking questions about neopronouns. Students also said they thought the assembly had led to a reduction in LGBT-phobic slurs and that they felt more comfortable around the school.

## Challenges and opportunities

It was clear that the Pride Groups conferred important positives across each of the schools and college; however, there were also common challenges, which, if addressed, could present opportunities to grow the size and impact of these groups. One such challenge was ensuring staff buy in to effectively communicate information about the groups. This Year 12 student from Red College explained how the Pride Group was run in her former school:

*I think the teachers were the main thing for me, 'cause obviously my form tutor, would skip past it [the Pride Group was part of the weekly tutor notices], and I would feel quite like it didn't actually mean anything. And when it came up on the PowerPoint, the people behind me, the popular people would laugh and obviously they would all say comments and stuff, and if I go, one of them would say, 'I'll go outside and see who's in there'.*

(Natalie, Year 12, Red College)

The indifference shown by the form tutor and the intimidating comments made by peers meant that the student felt unable to attend the Pride Group, which speaks to the earlier described reluctance she felt in discussing her sexuality. Meyer uses Burke (1991) to explain that 'feedback from others that is incompatible with one's self-identity—a process he called identity interruptions—can cause distress' (Meyer, 2003, p. 7). The concept of identity interruptions reveals the challenge for LGBT+ young people in exploring and constructing a coherent narrative about themselves. A Pride Group is a vital space and without it, students may have no opportunity to develop ontological security. However, if Pride Groups remain ghettoised, students will inevitably be met with identity interruptions once they leave the space. The examples of allyship explored earlier demonstrate ways that greater acceptance and allyship can be developed to allow students to develop a coherent self-identity in the wider school. When the student was asked what would have made the Pride Group more effective in her former school, she replied:

*All teachers need to come together.*

(Natalie, Year 12, Red College)

A student in the Blue School focus group made a similar point about the need for greater understanding from teachers and smiled when she said:

*The teachers need teaching sometimes.*

(Margot, Year 8, Blue School)

The Blue School focus group shared that they would like to run a session for their teachers on terminology and the role of the Pride Club; a further example of how schools can empower and learn from their Pride Groups to counter hegemonic practice and allow co-construction with students. Similarly, in Yellow School, some Year 11s had made a PowerPoint for 'Allies Week' that was sent to all form tutors to show, but the students said that many did not show it, and those that did just rushed through it. The group explained that to remedy this, they think teachers need to be empowered and even held to account. The students' concerns about their teachers' knowledge or confidence in discussing LGBT+ topics speaks to a broader issue that needs addressing at both teacher training and CPD level (Brett et al., 2024; Swanson & Gettinger, 2016; Taylor et al., 2016).

A further challenge in setting up a Pride Group is providing clarity on what the group's purpose is and who it is for. As Formby and Woodiwiss discuss: 'opening groups up beyond those who identify as LGBT+ can lead to confusion about their purpose, as well as making it more difficult to facilitate LGBT+ peer support in a safe space' (Formby & Woodiwiss, 2023, p. 45). This confusion will be a focus for years 2 and 3 of the research; however, in the first year, it was not raised as a particular concern. Although all groups were open to both LGBT+ students and allies, allies attended in only two schools, and then just one or two who were friends with members of the group. As Pride Groups grow in size, who is welcome to attend them is a question that schools should seek to address.

The size of Pride Groups is a consideration that requires further research to understand how a 'critical mass' may be required to make new students feel welcome. The two groups where allies attended (Purple School and Orange School) were large, with 20 or more students, which allowed for smaller friendship subgroups and a degree of anonymity. Most of the Pride Groups were small, with 10 or fewer attendees, which for prospective students could be seen as cliquy or for a particular 'type' of pupil, such as the majority SEND group discussed earlier. Although the literature clearly demonstrates the positive impact of community-building and identity affirmation, the literature often treats LGBT+ as a homogenous group. There were clear trends across the schools, with specific gender and sexual identities dominating the smaller groups. The groups were all heavily skewed towards students identifying as female, which perhaps speaks to the role hegemonic masculinity still plays in upholding gendered expectations (Rosen & Nofziger, 2019). There were also a limited number of trans and non-binary students that attended the groups, which again raises the question of whether the unique needs of these students can be met in such an environment.

Purple School had the most well-attended Pride Group in this research, with around 30 students attending the group weekly. This Pride Group was set up by the now headteacher, who was openly queer and still attended the group; they felt the importance they placed upon the group was one of the keys to its success. The Pride Group was a space of excitement and energy, and due to the group's size, it attracted a broad range of LGBT+ identities and allies. On the day of the researcher's visit, two students attended for the first time and were warmly welcomed. The headteacher explained how they had worked hard to maintain the size and success of the group and that, crucially, it was just one aspect of the school's approach to diversity and inclusion.

## CONCLUSION

Despite improved UK social attitudes (Curtice, 2023) and the implementation of statutory school guidance (DfE, 2019, 2021), schools still remain spaces of entrenched heteronormativity, leaving many LGBT+ young people vulnerable to increased chances of poor mental health (Bradlow et al., 2017; Just Like Us, 2021; Kosciw et al., 2022). This paper explored two key research questions in relation to this challenge: What impact do Pride Groups have on the LGBT+ students that attend them? and What impact can they have in developing wider school allyship?

The narratives from the eight schools and college reveal the vital role that Pride Groups can play in providing LGBT+ young people with a safe space to explore their gender or sexual identity and to develop a sense of community. Through having their identities validated and understood by peers, young people can begin to develop coherent narratives about their lives. Giddens' (1991) concept of ontological security has been employed to illustrate the crucial roles that stability and predictability play in helping young people to manage anxiety and stress. The predictable and supportive Pride Group environments allow students to feel safe in exploring their LGBT+ identities. This ontological security helps pupils to build a strong sense of self, which is vital for wellbeing in their time at school, as well as for periods of transition later in life. Meyer (2003) has been used to explore the types of stress unique to LGBT+ people, examining how Pride Groups can provide space for young people to develop the support networks and self-confidence they require to ameliorate these stressors (Xu et al., 2024). As Meyer (2003) states, without a sense of group membership 'even otherwise-resourceful individuals have deficient coping' (p. 7). Pride Groups are effective in helping to reduce the impact of distal stressors through creating physically and socially safe spaces, and in reducing proximal stressors through helping students to rationalise anxieties and process internalised stigma. In response to the first research question, the findings overwhelmingly emphasise the positive impact of Pride Groups in empowering students, developing communities of support and improving self-confidence and wellbeing.

In response to the second question, the research demonstrates how Pride Groups can confer important benefits for the wider school community in the form of allyship. For example, the data has presented instances of a senior leadership team adapting their school inclusion policies after the Pride Group presented their lived experiences to them; improvements in school attitudes because of whole-staff assemblies and CPD; and powerful examples of empathy and allyship being developed in moments of personal connection between students. The research also draws attention to some of the concerns raised by Formby and Woodiwiss (2023) and cautions schools to carefully consider the need for a Pride Group and to be clear about what its purpose is. Pride Groups that are complementary to a school's broader approach to LGBT+ inclusion can have enormous value for the students that attend them and for the wider school community. This could be enhanced further through forming connections with local LGBT+ organisations to build support for students, parents and teachers. However, Pride Groups that are created to simply carve out a space of safety within a hostile school environment have the potential for harm, as students become segregated from the wider school community and seen as victims in need of protecting (Formby, 2013; Youdell, 2004).

This research contributes important findings to the significant and notable gap in the UK-based Pride Groups literature. Schools have a statutory duty to ensure the safety and wellbeing of their LGBT+ students, which, as the evidence suggests, many institutions are currently not meeting. Pride Groups are a proven resource that schools can implement as part of their holistic approach to inclusion. School leaders should empower and learn from their Pride Groups and work towards cultivating ontological security not just for their LGBT+ students, but for every student in their school community.



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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

## ETHICAL STATEMENT

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Derby and the research was designed in line with BERA's Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research.

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