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## SETTING THE SCENE

*'I feel like I was cheated out of a sound start in life. I could have had those role models, I could have had books showing different family types, but there was nothing. There was absolutely nothing at that point which showed that being gay was okay.'*

Helen Richardson

### IN THEORY

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As excited as we were to write this book, it was hard to not also feel a sense of melancholy that books about LGBT+ inclusion still need to exist. However, when you consider that in this century there were still UK laws specifically legislating that children should not be taught that it is okay to be LGBT+, it quickly becomes apparent why these texts remain vital. Most countries around the world have long and complicated LGBT+ histories; today, there are many countries that still go to extreme lengths to diminish or deny our existence. Despite its baffling logic, many governments and authorities reason that if they restrict LGBT+ education in their schools, that their citizens will all magically turn out to be heterosexual and cisgender. This logic only works, of course, on the principle that being LGBT+ is a choice, proving in one sentence why this widespread approach simply doesn't work. A lot of our guests have joked that it's a wonder they turned out to be gay despite having heterosexuality so aggressively promoted to them throughout their childhood.

Encouragingly, many countries are now making positive strides with LGBT+ inclusion and have begun to ensure that LGBT+ lives are also learnt about within schools.

However, the passage of time alone does not undo the significant damage that comes from decades of state-sanctioned marginalisation and vilification. Schools need to acknowledge that LGBT+ inclusion in education has been stunted by several decades. We cannot simply pop on a rainbow lanyard and consider it job done, as we will explore in the final chapter. We must disentangle the complicated history of LGBT+ exclusion in education to ensure schools become inclusive in a way that we would expect for the 21st century.

This chapter will give a brief overview of the historical context, before positioning where we are today with LGBT+ inclusive education, highlighting the progress that has been made, and considering some of the challenges that remain. While this book is designed to be used in schools around the world, the context and examples are naturally what you would expect from two UK writers. Although UK-centric, we believe the chapter themes are universal and that the stories and advice in this book will help you to make your classrooms and schools more inclusive, whatever your context.

The 1980s were a particularly dark time for LGBT+ people, particularly gay men. In 1987, a UK poll suggested that 64% of the population thought homosexual activity was 'always wrong' (Pearce et al. 2013). Anderson (2010) attributes this to the rise of moralistic right-wing politics, the politicisation of evangelical religion, and the AIDS crisis. Paul Baker, a guest on the podcast, perfectly captures the mood of this troubling time in his superb book *Outrageous!* (2022) which charts how the cultural temperature of the 80s led to the introduction of Section 28 in the UK. Section 28 was a pernicious and somewhat desperate piece of legislation, essentially banning LGBT+ education in UK schools, decreeing that 'local authorities shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality'. It was the first new piece of anti-LGBT+ UK legislation in over 100 years.

You can watch then-UK-Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's chilling 1987 speech on YouTube justifying Section 28, where she proclaimed that children were 'being taught that they had the inalienable right to be gay' and that 'all of those children were being cheated of a sound start in life'. She was right about one thing, children were being cheated of a sound start in life, but it wasn't the children she was talking about. Section 28 meant that LGBT+ young people had to grow up in a culture of silence and fear, without role models or someone to turn to. LGBT+ teachers were forced into the closet for fear of 'promoting' LGBT+ lives through their mere existence, and all children were robbed of a chance to develop empathy and learn about the lives of the LGBT+ people who would be their friends, family, and colleagues in later life. Catherine Lee, a guest on the podcast, explores the impact of Section 28 in her book *Pretended: Schools and Section 28: Historical, Cultural and Personal Perspectives* (2023).

It's hard to measure the specific impact of Section 28, as sadly it seemed to reflect the national and even international mood of the time. However, what we can say is that Section 28 was a government-stamped endorsement of the homophobic and intolerant attitudes of the era which made schools a scary and isolating place for LGBT+ people, instilling a sense of fear and self-policing that continues to this day.

After 15 damaging years, Section 28 was repealed (2000 in Scotland, 2003 in the rest of the UK). The problem was, Section 28 was such a vague piece of legislation to begin with, that when it was quietly repealed, educators remained uncertain about what they could and couldn't talk about in their classrooms. As most teachers today were either educated under Section 28 or were teachers at the time, over 20 years later, we still have an education system that is dogged with uncertainty about which aspects of LGBT+ lives are acceptable to discuss. Making something 'not illegal' is not the same as empowering and educating teachers to make LGBT+ inclusion a top priority.

International research, both qualitative and quantitative, highlights that this isn't just a UK concern and that LGBT+ inclusion in education remains an issue around the world. There are numerous qualitative studies, including my own, which highlight the challenges facing LGBT+ teachers in education (Braun 2011; Brett 2021; Connell 2015; DePalma and Atkinson 2006). The quantitative studies of organisations such as the UK's Stonewall and Just Like Us, as well as America's GLAAD, highlight the difficulties that LGBT+ young people still face in schools today. Stonewall's School Report (Bradlow et al. 2017) highlights that almost half of all LGBT+ pupils still face bullying, and that more than two in five trans young people have tried to take their own life. Just Like Us (2021) identifies that LGBT+ young people are twice as likely to contemplate suicide, with black LGBT+ young people three times more likely (we explore intersectionality in Chapter 7). I identify these statistics not to shock, but to illustrate that, despite progress, schools are still often experienced as unsafe spaces for LGBT+ people.

We debated whether to include the impact that Covid has had on LGBT+ communities in this book for fear it would quickly seem dated. However, the full impact of Covid may not be known for another generation and so it's therefore worthy of discussion. Just Like Us, in their *Growing Up LGBT+: The impact of school, home and coronavirus on LGBT+ young people* report (2021), identified that 68% of LGBT+ young people said their mental health had 'got worse' since the pandemic began and that 52% of LGBT+ young people felt lonely every day during lockdown. These feelings of isolation were attributed to being denied the spaces and communities where they could safely explore their identities, as they often felt unable to do this with their families. Although this research focuses on the pandemic, the findings

also help us to imagine the challenges young people face when LGBT+ inclusion remains absent in their school.

Prior to the pandemic, and in a big step forward for inclusive education, the UK government issued guidance stating that it would be mandatory for LGBT+ content to be taught within Relationships and Sex Education (RSE). The 2019 guidance stated the following:

Schools should ensure that all of their teaching is sensitive and age appropriate in approach and content. At the point at which schools consider it appropriate to teach their pupils about LGBT, they should ensure that this content is fully integrated into their programmes of study for this area of the curriculum rather than delivered as a stand-alone unit or lesson. Schools are free to determine how they do this, and we expect all pupils to have been taught LGBT content at a timely point as part of this area of the curriculum.

Depending on your perspective, this legislation can be read as an important and much needed update to the curriculum, or perhaps more cynically, a rather vague and non-committal set of guidance. Leaving schools 'free to determine how to do this' means this work can be approached inconsistently and that the quality of LGBT+ education is largely determined by individual leadership teams and the importance they place upon it. In a brilliant move in 2021, Scotland showed they are once again a step ahead of the rest of the UK, becoming the first country in the world to embed LGBT+ education across their entire school curriculum. In 2022, the Department for Education updated the *Keeping Children Safe in Education* guidance to highlight that students who are LGBT+, or perceived to be LGBT+, are at greater risk of harm. The document also highlights that these risks may heighten further if the child doesn't have a 'trusted adult' in their life who they can be open with.

As you can see, there has been a phenomenal amount of progress with LGBT+ inclusive education in just a few decades. While this is an incredibly short and potted history, it gives you a flavour of the challenges faced up to this point. Although the progress that has been made is cause for celebration, the job is not yet done as approaches to LGBT+ inclusion remain varied and inconsistent, even with the updated guidance. Schools are their own living and breathing ecosystems, each with their own unique contexts and challenges, where LGBT+ inclusion can range from a top priority to non-existent. There is still a lot to be done, but with the government finally acknowledging the importance of this work, there has never been a better time and opportunity for us as educators to reimagine our schools as LGBT+ inclusive spaces.

## IN PRACTICE

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Picture a seed planted in the middle of your school grounds.

Day after day, week after week, year after year, the seed is allowed to grow, untamed, for over a decade. The roots stretch out under the surface of the ground consuming every nutrient they come across, preventing anything else from growing. The plant stretches way above the school, towering higher and higher each year. Its dense leaves cast a dark shadow over the grounds of the school.

Granted, I have a tendency to be dramatic, but since I learnt about Section 28 this is exactly how I visualise it. The legislation was a seed of silence and shame which was planted in our educational spaces in 1988. The culture, fear, and moral panic of the time meant that this seemingly small seed was able to grow, thrive, and stretch into every corner of UK educational spaces.

Then, after 15 years when the legislation was repealed, the plant was cut down at its source – but the roots remained. The silence and shame that was allowed to grow in our educational spaces, and in the consciousness of the people who occupied them, remained very much rooted in our schools. As Adam put it: ‘making something “not illegal” is not the same as empowering and educating teachers to make LGBT+ inclusion a top priority.’ Repealing Section 28 did not unroot the damage caused by it.

I remember the first day I read the words Section 28 because, ironically, it was the same day I had come out to my own class for the first time. It was a Year 6 class, during my third year of teaching, and I had chosen to share my identity with them (a story I share in Chapter 9). Later that evening, as I caught up on the news, I was drawn in by one particular story. On the same date that I came out for the first time in an educational space, 16 years earlier Section 28 had been repealed in England. The irony! On the anniversary of the end of Section 28 I had become a visibly queer person in a way that teachers were prevented from doing during my own primary education.

That night I read every article I could find about Section 28. It felt like I had found the source of the silence and shame which surrounded many of my own educational experiences. I read the stories of people who were impacted by the legislation both as teachers, and as students. As I read more, ‘Section 28’ – which meant nothing to me hours before – began to hold so much weight.

It was through the stories and lived experiences of real people that I built empathy and came to a greater understanding. That, in a sentence, is what the ‘In Practice’ sections of this book are hoping to ignite. In the second section of each chapter,

I will share with you the lived experiences of our podcast guests. Through their stories, I will try to demonstrate what the theory looks like in practice. We believe it is through stories of lived experience that we best build the empathy and understanding which is required for meaningful action. In the context of this chapter, I will be sharing stories of people's interactions with Section 28 to reveal how this legislation played out in practice through people's lives.

So many of our conversations touch on the legacy of Section 28, but one of our episodes is dedicated specifically to that. Paul Baker (S2, E13) is a Professor of English Language, a researcher, and great writer. His book *Outrageous!: The story of Section 28 and Britain's battle for LGBT education* plots all that we have discussed in this chapter in greater detail. His episode is a great starting point if you want to develop your understanding of Section 28, and the impact it has had on our educational spaces.

When reading Paul's book, I was surprised to learn about the inclusion work that was already happening in schools in the 1980s before Section 28 prevented it. We hear about this in more detail from Sue Sanders (S2, E1). Sue is an inspirational educator, the Chair of the 'Schools Out UK' Charity, and the co-founder of LGBT+ History Month (which I'll discuss in more detail in Chapter 5). Teaching in London in the 1980s, Sue was out and open to staff and students, and doing equality work in her setting. She quickly became involved in the fight against Section 28. At the time, Sue and her friends explored the legal parameters of Section 28 and felt that because schools were not directly under local authority control, the legislation could not be legally applied. They sent letters to all schools making this argument.

The legal strength of Section 28 is unclear. It was never judicially tested, and no prosecutions were made. However, the fear alone was enough to silence LGBT+ lives in schools, which had a devastating impact on staff and students. Helen Richardson (S2, E2) is now a teacher, and brilliant leader, working in primary education. She was seven years old when Section 28 became law and finished her teacher training the year it was repealed. Section 28 was the backdrop to all of her early educational experiences. At 10 years old, Helen knew she was a lesbian, but she felt unable to tell anybody until she was 23. She tells us how damaging it was to not see herself reflected anywhere. The silence Section 28 created meant that Helen could only imagine one future for herself. She did everything she could to be what she was taught was 'normal', and to work towards a future where she would marry a man and have children. A future she did not want, but the only one the silence allowed her to imagine was possible.

It wasn't just the students in schools who were impacted, but the educators too. Troy Jenkinson (S1, E13) is now a headteacher, an author, and an openly gay role model.

However, at the beginning of his teaching career Troy was leading a double life: feeling unable to be honest in the classroom, or in the staff room. Troy shares a story of one day in his early career when he went into school expressing himself with a new haircut. His headteacher at the time told him that he could be sent home for the haircut. While she didn't threaten Section 28 explicitly, she alluded to it and told Troy that he must be 'very careful'. Troy felt the underlying message was that he could lose his job if he expressed himself in the workplace. Following this interaction, Troy knew he had to be mindful at all times. He would change pronouns when talking about his boyfriends and spent much of his energy concealing who he really was.

This forced concealment is sadly a common experience for many LGBT+ educators working through Section 28. Professor Catherine Lee (S2, E6) had just started her teaching career as Section 28 became UK law. Catherine describes this time as terrifying and explains how the ambiguity of the legislation only worked to heighten that fear. As fear travelled through school corridors, Catherine remembers colleagues who were 'moved on' as a result of discussing their sexuality. She found herself increasingly forced to hide herself, using her energy to safely navigate staff room conversations.

Teaching in Liverpool at the time, Catherine was out in the gay scene with her partner one Saturday night when she bumped into a student from her school. Unsure what the girl would say back at school, Catherine began to imagine losing her job. She was terrified. The following Monday she stood, overseeing the school cross country, waiting for her headteacher to summon her and end her career.

Instead, the young girl Catherine had seen in that club approached her and asked to speak about the weekend. She disclosed to Catherine that she was struggling with her own identity, and that she had been there to find other people like her. Catherine of course wanted to say, 'If you're gay that is okay, take your time, be yourself, and if you want to talk to somebody I am here.' But, with the weight of Section 28 on her shoulders, she couldn't. Instead, Catherine told that young person that she was not gay. 'It would break your family's hearts if you were, and you should never speak to me about this again.'

Catherine shut the conversation down.

She still thinks about that student to this day. In our conversation, she tells us what she would say if able to relive that moment: 'Just be yourself. It is going to be alright. Stop second guessing, stop racing ahead with your thoughts. Stop worrying. Nobody has the right to tell you who you can and can't be, and who you can and can't love.'

Can you imagine the impact this moment must have had on her as a new teacher? Or on the frightened and confused student? You can hear this story in full on the podcast or read it in more detail in Catherine's latest book: *Pretended: Schools and*

*Section 28: Historical, Cultural and Personal Perspectives (2023)*. Her experiences of Section 28 also inspired the film *Blue Jean*.

Catherine wishes she could go back in time to change what she said, but she knows that she can't. Instead, she uses this experience to motivate her to make sure that people have better experiences now through researching LGBT+ teachers and supporting LGBT+ leaders. In our podcast she describes Section 28 as the lemons but recognises the opportunity she now has to make lemonade.

Many of our guests share this sentiment. Our podcast is full of stories of people's experiences in non-inclusive educational spaces, and how this motivates their work now. While it's important to recognise the damaging impact of our educational history, it is hopeful to see how these awful experiences are now motivating change.

These stories collectively help to reveal the weight of Section 28, and how it played out in practice through the lives of real people. While these stories are specific to the UK, our conversations on the podcast demonstrate that the history of silence and shame surrounding LGBT+ existence stretches beyond our islands. B Guerriero (S1, E5) is a primary school teacher who is non-binary, and grew up in Italy. Karan Bhumbra (S1, E6) is a secondary school science teacher who is a gay man who grew up in India. They share with us their experiences growing up in an Italian school, and a Catholic convent school in India respectively. While their stories are unique, the same culture of silence and shame is reflected in them both. The history of non-inclusive educational spaces stretches beyond the UK context.

I mentioned earlier that this silence and shame was not only rooted in our educational spaces, but in the consciousness of the people who occupied them at the time. It is because of this that we still see the shadows of silence and shame to this day. Most people who now work and lead in our schools were themselves, at least partly, educated under an education system that was not LGBT+ inclusive. Whether we are conscious of it or not, our non-inclusive educational history can still impact our views of educational spaces today.

So, how do we unroot this silence and shame from our schools? As we argued in the introduction, we believe that this unrooting requires a collective reimagining. As Adam explained earlier, we have already come some way in that reimagining, and a phenomenal amount of progress with LGBT+ inclusive education has happened in just a few decades.

We only need to look at the experiences of those entering the profession now to see how far we have come. Scotty Cartwright (S1, E15) was at the beginning of his teaching career when we spoke with him. During his training year, he had already become involved in inclusive education work. When asked if he was gay by a student, Scotty felt safe to answer truthfully. He was honest about his identity in the



interview for his first teaching position, and continues to be now in the classroom, and in the staff room. It is this trajectory which provides us with hope that things are going in the right direction.

Hope is important, and I am conscious that the first chapter of this book has not been one of hope. However, we need to explore the challenges before we present the solutions. The following two chapters will introduce you to two further challenges in our current educational context: heteronormativity and cisnormativity. We hope that in reading these first three chapters, you understand more thoroughly our call for a reimagining of educational spaces. The chapters which follow will then explore some of the solutions and themes we need to consider to continue reimagining, to continue unrooting silence and shame, and to finally create educational spaces which are truly LGBT+ inclusive. Spaces where every person is free to be themselves, feels seen, feels safe, feels supported, and feels like they belong.

## IN ACTION

Having discussed the theory and research behind this theme and explored what this looks like in practice through the lived experiences of our podcast guests, we will end each chapter reflecting on what the consequences of this discussion might look like in action.

This section will pose three reflective opportunities. This reflection will look different for everybody, but we encourage you to actively engage with these questions; whether this is through individual reflection and note taking, using these questions as a basis for conversation with colleagues, or as a prompt to engage staff in CPD. We hope this engagement will allow you to develop clear action points as you begin to reimagine your own educational settings.

Spend some time reflecting on your own educational experience.

**What did LGBT+ inclusion, or exclusion, look like in your schooling?**

Reflect on how your own views of education may have been shaped by those experiences.

**Do you have certain views of what educational spaces should be like?**

Reflect on the educational spaces you occupy now.

**What do you feel you can or can't say about LGBT+ lives in your school? What knowledge and skills do you need to develop further to become more confident with LGBT+ inclusion?**

## PODCAST EPISODES REFERENCED IN THIS CHAPTER

- Season 2, Episode 13 – Professor Paul Baker

Paul (he/him) is a Professor of English Language and a researcher and writer. Paul joins us to discuss his latest book: *Outrageous!*, which charts the story of Section 28 and the battle for LGBT+ education.

- Season 2, Episode 1 – Professor Emeritus Sue Sanders & Lynne Nicholls

Sue (she/her) is an inspirational educator and the co-founder of LGBT+ History Month. Lynne (she/her) is the Chair of Trustees for charity Schools Out. They join us to discuss the history of LGBT+ inclusive education, LGBT+ History Month, and the work of Schools Out.

- Season 2, Episode 2 – Helen Richardson

Helen Richardson (she/her) is a Deputy Headteacher and led the diversity network for her school's trust. Helen joins us to share her experience growing up during Section 28, and now working as an out, lesbian educator.

- Season 1, Episode 13 – Troy Jenkinson

Troy (he/him) is a primary school headteacher and children's book author. He joins us to share his experience as an early career teacher during Section 28, and now as an inclusive leader.

- Season 2, Episode 6 – Professor Catherine Lee

Catherine (she/her) was a PE teacher before stepping into academia at Anglia Ruskin University. She joins us to discuss her experience as a lesbian PE teacher during Section 28, her current research into LGBT+ leadership, and setting up the Courageous Leaders programme.

- Season 1, Episode 5 – B Guerriero

B (they/them) is a primary school teacher, LGBT+ youth worker, and a trustee of the UK Literacy Association. They join us to share their experience as a non-binary immigrant navigating a career in education.

- Season 1, Episode 6 – Karan Bhumbra

Karan (he/him) is a secondary school science teacher. He joins us to share his experience as a gay, Indian science teacher working to be a positive representation for all facets of his identity.

- Season 1, Episode 15 – Scotty Cartwright

Scotty (he/him) is an early career English teacher, who was a trainee when we spoke. He joins us to discuss his experience as a gay man joining the teaching profession.

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