

Experiences of Education: Role Models in the lives of Young Disabled LGBT+ persons

Alex Toft

Research Fellow, Nottingham Centre for Children, Young People and Families

Please cite as: Toft, A. 2022. **Experiences of Education: Role Models in the lives of Young Disabled LGBT+ persons**. Available at: <https://alextoft.wordpress.com/experiences-of-education-role-models-in-the-lives-of-young-disabled-lgbt-persons/>

Introductory note

In this short research report I will highlight the experiences of young people who are disabled and LGBT+ in relation to Relationship and Sex Education (RSE). The participants did not focus upon ways to revise the national curriculum (see Toft and Franklin, 2020); rather, they explored the importance of LGBT+ and disabled visibility within schools through role models and a shift in the whole school ethos.

Notes on the methods

This brief report uses data collected as part of an ongoing research project exploring the lived experiences of young people who are disabled and LGBT+. Methods ranged from literature reviews, interviews, focus groups and interactive workshops. Full details are reported in: Toft et al, 2020; Toft and Franklin, 2020; Toft 2020a; Toft 2020b.

The importance of Role Models

The participants who took part in the research discussed how having people whose lives were in some way similar to theirs, had a positive impact upon the way they thought about themselves. A high-profile and visible person gave the participants validation about their identities but also proof that the cultural status quo could be challenged. Amy, during an interview stated:

[Missy Elliott] suffered a lot with the LGBT community. She also suffered a lot with mental health and watched her mom kill her dad because he was abusive...she is my ultimate role model because it's the whole coming out in the black community, coming out in her industry, like all of it, she is amazing. (Amy, she/her, interview)

Missy Elliott's challenges related to working against oppressive forces encountered in potentially unsafe spaces (the music industry). Amy argued that Missy Elliott's openness about sexuality also helped her to understand her own experiences as a black young person.

The participants pushed this idea further by arguing that role models also work to change societal understanding and challenge outdated but accepted norms. One participant, Bridge, suggested that

role models help people to be their authentic selves, whilst also educating others by showing them other ways of being/living:

People can become more accepting if they see someone is not like themselves, and it helps me too because I can say I'm a bit like them. (Bridget, she/her, interview)

Within education

The participants were frustrated at not being able to see themselves within the education system- and this made a number of participants question their own identity. During an interview, Jake stated:

I don't see myself anywhere and other people don't see me anywhere. That's the most difficult thing I think...other people don't see it in lessons so it's OK to think I'm weird because I'm not there, like, at all. (Jake, he/him, interview)

For Jake, the lack of visibility of other disabled LGBT+ people had a negative impact. People had labelled Jake as strange and for Jake, there were no other examples that could suggest otherwise. Having no visibility simply validated the ableist and heteronormative environment of the school. In order to combat this, the participants wanted greater visibility of their lives at school by having LGBT+ lives across the school across all lessons and across the school in general. The call to normalise disabled LGBT+ lives was made very clearly.

Due to the perceived invisibility, the participants had taken the lead in educating others about their lives. One participant, Edie, explained how they had been working to form an LGBT+ community group at school. However, this was greeted with great resistance:

Our college is upside down, we are having to teach the teachers about these things, but it is not easy...it's really hard because no-one listens, they don't want to know from us. We are just the ones who are wrong because no-one else talks about it. (Edie, they, interview)

It is clear that Edie was facing great difficulty in setting up the group. This highlighted the fact that although the teachers were not educated about the issues Edie faced, they were also unwilling to accept Edie as an expert in their own lives.

Mentorship

For the majority of the participants, role models became reference points for their own lives. A number of the participants in my research were fortunate to have a mentor who identified as LGBT+ and disabled. Seeing the mentor in their role helped them to reconsider preconceptions about what they could achieve:

I think that for example [Mentor's name] has a job and is working with young people that have disabilities, in a mentor role. It shows that it is possible. It is the hardest journey and I

think now, when you are young, there is something ahead. If you are working for it, there are going to be hills to overcome. (Kaarim, he/him, interview)

Role models and mentors were seen as people who have shown that being disabled and LGBT+ was a part of everyday life and conducive with living well. In this regard they work to redress messages that the young people have internalised about what they can achieve in life.

One young person, Jeff, spoke about this in terms of being settled and comfortable with yourself:

I like attending the group and seeing other people like me who are part of the group, but also chatting with [mentor] because they seem so settled with everything. They can use their own experiences to help us. (Jeff, they/them, interactive workshop)

Here Jeff is talking about how comfortable the mentor is in their own bodies. Simply being visible and LGBT+ and disabled, was an act of education for the young people. However, the young people also noted the importance of making the move from role-model towards mentor, or from being a passive figure towards an engaged active educator.

For the majority of the participants, mentors would need to be knowledgeable about LGBT+ lives, not matter whether they are LGBT+ themselves. However, it was clear that there was appreciation of receiving information from those who were also LGBT+ and disabled. Delivery of such information by another LGBT+ disabled person was viewed as authentic and meaningful, as Charlotte bluntly states:

Having someone who is gay talking about gay stuff, it's the only thing that makes sense. They know these things. (Charlotte, interactive workshop)

Concluding thoughts

For the participants, informal RSE was more powerful and relevant in making a difference in their lives (or others' understanding of their lives)- when compared to an attempt to revise the RSE curriculum. The research suggests there are at least five things that role models provide:

- 1- Evidence that the status quo can be challenged
- 2- Visible figures that work to question society's misunderstanding about LGBT+ and disabled lives
- 3- A normalising effect that become more pronounced with increased visibility
- 4- Points of reference or inspiration
- 5- Education for others, particularly for those mentors who can use their own lived experiences.

References

Toft, A., 2020a. Parallels and alliances: The lived experiences of young, disabled bisexual people. *Journal of Bisexuality*, 20(2), pp.183-201.

Toft, A., 2020b. Identity management and community belonging: The coming out careers of young disabled LGBT+ persons. *Sexuality & Culture*, 24(6), pp.1893-1912.

Toft, A., and A. Franklin. 2020. "Towards Expansive and Inclusive Relationship and Sex Education." In Edited by A. Toft and A. Franklin. *Young, Disabled and LGBT+*, 213–227. Abingdon: Routledge.

Toft, A., A. Franklin, and E. Langley. 2020. "You're Not Sure that You are Gay Yet': The Perpetuation of the 'Phase' in the Lives of Young Disabled LGBT+ People." *Sexualities* 23 (4): 516–529. doi:10.1177/1363460719842135.