

Why are we letting faith schools stigmatise same-sex relationships?

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Ofsted penalises schools that refuse to teach about LGBT people, but seems to ignore other schools that teach same-sex relationships are morally wrong. Megan Manson says this double standard needs to end.

A strange development has emerged from the ongoing discussion about LGBT-inclusive education. It seems that it's unacceptable for a school to refrain from talking about the existence of same-sex relationships, but it is acceptable for a school to teach that same-sex relationships are wicked.

In its [2017–20 equality objectives document](#), the education inspectorate Ofsted says it gives "due regard to equality, diversity and inclusion during inspection". It adds that "inspectors will consider whether those we inspect comply with their relevant duties set out in the Equality Act 2010", as well as promoting "equality and diversity".

Ofsted inspectors have regularly applied these criteria in their inspections of faith schools. Many independent faith schools omit teaching about the protected characteristics of sexual orientation and gender reassignment. This is because those schools' leaders believe teaching about same-sex relationships and related issues is incompatible with the religious ethos of the school. But Ofsted does not accept religious ethos as a reason for failing to teach about these protected characteristics, and penalises the schools that omit them.

In 2018, Ofsted gave a rating of 'inadequate' to five independent Jewish schools that failed to teach about LGBT people. They included [Yeshivah Ohr Torah School](#) where leaders have not encouraged respect for people "who have protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010, such as in relation to their sexual orientation or gender reassignment"; [Bnois Jerusalem Girls School](#) where the anti-bullying policy does not include "homophobic bullying"; and [Beis Medrash Elyon](#), where pupils are "not aware of all the characteristics protected by the Equality Act 2010" including sexual orientation. The inspector at Beis Medrash Elyon noted that this is "in keeping with the school's aims and ethos".

Ofsted have not only penalised Jewish schools for failing to teach about LGBT people. In 2017, the independent Islamic [Buttercup Primary School](#) was rated 'inadequate' partly because it "failed to ensure that pupils develop an understanding and respect for people who have protected characteristics". And in March this year at [Stanborough Primary School](#), an independent Seventh Day Adventist school, pupils told inspectors that "they do not learn about protected groups," which contributed to the school's 'inadequate' rating.

It is admirable that Ofsted is refusing to let religious schools ignore requirements to teach about LGBT people. But it needs to go much further.

Last week, Ofsted chief inspector Amanda Spielman gave a [speech](#) at LGBT advocacy group Stonewall in which she rightly criticised the religiously-motivated protests at Parkfield Community School, Anderton Park School and other schools teaching that some children have two mummies

or two daddies.

But she went on to add faith schools "may teach that gay marriage is both legal and socially accepted in this country, but also that their own religion does not countenance same-sex relationships".

Spielman's phrase "does not countenance same-sex relationships" does not quite do justice to what this means in practice. Cutting through the euphemisms, it means faith schools must teach about same-sex relationships – but they are allowed to teach that same-sex relationships are wrong and shameful.

This is alarming given the findings of the National Secular Society's 2018 report, [Unsafe Sex Education: The risk of letting religious schools teach within the tenets of their faith](#). We found many state-funded secondary Catholic schools have policies stating that same-sex relationships are wrong, in accordance with the teachings of the Catholic Church.

All Saints Catholic School and Technology College's relationships & sex education (RSE) [policy](#) refers to the "special problems of homosexuals" and "repentance and forgiveness for sexual sins" in relation to same-sex relationships.

Holy Trinity Academy's [RSE policy](#) calls same-sex relationships "unacceptable" because they do not "respect the complimentary (*sic*) nature of male and female" and lack "the life giving potential to proper sexual love".

Saint John Bosco College's [RSE policy](#) refers to homosexuality as "objectively disordered".

St Peter's Catholic School and Specialist Science College's [RSE policy](#) says "homosexual acts go against the natural order".

All of these schools were given a 'Good' or 'Outstanding' rating in their most recent Ofsted inspection.

It should be noted that in January an Islamic independent school, Lantern of Knowledge Secondary School, [failed](#) its Ofsted inspection partly because inspectors found a book in the school library that said "homosexuals advocate a view of human relationships that is at odds with the natural order and stability of human society". This isn't far removed from what the above Catholic schools are including in their official policies.

Many would find it difficult to see how a school that teaches same-sex relationships are "unacceptable" and LGBT people are "disordered" can possibly be promoting equality, diversity and respect for protected characteristics. Many would feel a school teaching that same-sex relationships are wrong is just as bad, if not worse, than a school refusing to teach about same-sex relationships at all.

No matter how committed a school says it is to promoting equality and tackling homophobic bullying, denouncing same-sex relationships as a moral evil as part of an official school policy undermines this completely. As Scottish National Party MP Mhairi Black put it in an [interview](#) last week, "if you are indoctrinating children into believing that gay people don't exist and when they do exist they're perverts or they're to be pitied, or saved in some shape or form, then no, that's not on, because that's a lie".

Research into the experiences of LGBT young people in 2017 found that just 10% of LGBT pupils at faith schools learnt about where to go for help and advice about same-sex relationships at

school, compared to 20% of LGBT pupils overall. Similarly, only 10% of LGBT pupils at faith schools learnt about safe sex in relation to same-sex relationships, compared to 20% overall.

The research found LGBT pupils of faith are somewhat more likely to have tried to take their own life than those who are not of faith (30% compared to 25%). It quoted one pupil at a secondary faith school who said: "In religious education we learnt that the Bible was against anything other than heterosexuality. I was so scared. I had to teach myself everything. What we learnt in religious education about how we are viewed by our peers, teachers and parents made people terrified."

That [research](#) was by Stonewall – the same group that Spielman addressed when she said faith schools may continue to teach about LGBT people within the tenets of their faith.

Ofsted needs to take on board that promoting LGBT equality in schools means more than simply acknowledging LGBT people exist. It means teaching that there's nothing "disordered" about same-sex attraction and nothing "morally wrong" about same-sex relationships. Regardless of their sexuality or the sexuality of their parents, children of every religion and belief background are entitled to study in a welcoming and accepting school that doesn't make them feel ashamed or frightened about who they are, and prepares them for life in the diverse society of the UK.

Ofsted must ensure all schools, regardless of their ethos, adhere to this very basic standard. And if faith schools can't do this, it's another reason to make us question why we're funding them at all.

The NSS is writing to Ofsted on this issue.

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