

How The Senior Leadership Team Can Support an Inclusive LGBTIQ+ Culture In Maltese Church Secondary Schools: Students' Perspectives

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Abstract

Social justice and equity are vital measures that fall under the responsibilities of the Senior Leadership Team. These are the underpinning values of inclusive education. Leadership is to bring about a sense of empowerment to the individuals who form part of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex and Queer community, a minority group, where one's contribution is valued. This creates a safe learning environment where a zero tolerance to harassment, bullying and discrimination is endorsed by policies which are communicated and adhered to by all stakeholders. The beliefs of the Catholic Church's teachings are espoused with a mission and ethos to serve everyone, which serves as a moral guidance for the leadership of a church school. This research sheds light on the current situation of how the Senior Leadership Team supports an inclusive Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex and Queer culture in church secondary schools in Malta, analysed through the student participants' voices. The study adopted a qualitative approach, where the data was presented in alignment with the research questions, then analysed to draw up recommendations to enhance and reaffirm the pivotal role of the Senior Leadership Team, with the necessary support to embed an inclusive Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex and Queer culture that permeates the school.

Keywords

Senior Leadership Team, Inclusion, LGBTIQ+, church, schools

Introduction

Education is oriented towards values such as equity, social justice, inclusion, and diversity to help individuals engage actively in society. Equity and diversity are among the principal issues in education, educational leadership, and educational leadership research (Tillman & Scheurich, 2013). Inclusive education aims to ensure that specific values and principles are a common standard of practice for all students and that the learning environment is safe and

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supportive, comprising a zero tolerance for harassment, bullying and discrimination (Artiles et al., 2011); Shogren et al., 2014).

Maltese church schools, which serve around 30 per cent of the student population in Malta and Gozo (KSMR et al., 2023), are deeply rooted in Catholic values and aim to provide holistic, inclusive education while maintaining a strong Catholic identity. Attitudes toward gender non-conforming populations are shaped by the schools' commitment to inclusion and treating everyone as individuals, with emphasis on creating supportive communities and positive relationships. However, there is an ongoing challenge to strike a balance between openness to diversity and the preservation of Catholic values. While church schools strive to ensure all students feel unconditionally loved by God, perspectives and practices regarding gender diversity may vary across different schools and staff.

The principles of the National Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012) are viewed as an important tool for inclusion, aiming to empower learners to achieve their full potential. That said, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex and Queer (LGBTIQ+) persons still experience high rates of harassment, discrimination, bullying and physical assault due to their sexual orientation or gender expression (Kosciw et al., 2020). This reality is also present in schools, including local ones, even though significant policies such as The Respect for All Framework (MEDE, 2014), The Trans, Gender Variant and Intersex Students in Schools Policy (MEDE, 2015), and A Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools (MEYR, 2022) have been put in place to address issues faced by the LGBTIQ+ minority group.

The 2017 Malta National School Climate Survey Report (Pizmony-Levy, 2017) remains the only local report specifically addressing the theme of school climate in the Maltese context. Despite the lack of local research, the 2017 Malta National School Climate Survey Report also revealed that nearly half (49.6%) of LGBTIQ+ students felt unsafe at school in the previous year because of their sexual orientation, while one in four (27.3%) felt insecure because of their gender expression. Schools are intended to be safe spaces where standards and values are promoted, and where students are supported in flourishing and reaching their full potential (Freeman et al., 2007). Holley et al. (2005) defined the metaphor of a classroom as a safe space where students are allowed to feel secure enough to take risks, express their views in an honest manner, and share knowledge. This is even more important for church schools, which have the mission of improving the lives of students whilst implementing the best practices to succeed (SfCE, 2022). In all this, school leaders play a pivotal role in providing the necessary support to establish an inclusive culture in their school community.

The research focuses on students' perspectives on the role of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) in supporting an inclusive LGBTIQ+ culture in church secondary schools in Malta. It examines the impact, according to the students, of senior leadership on the

conceptualization and practice of inclusion in church secondary schools in Malta. The study attempts to answer the following three research questions using a qualitative approach:

1. What is the current situation regarding the role of the SLT in supporting an inclusive LGBTIQ+ culture in church secondary schools in Malta?
2. What awareness, knowledge, preparation, skills, and tools, if any, do SLT members possess to support such a culture?
3. What opportunities and challenges do SLT members face in this regard?

Personal Motivation

While listening to adults from the LGBTIQ+ community express their struggles, including how they were affected psychologically and physically, the researcher was struck by the question of why individuals should undergo such distress within their community. These encounters revealed that issues such as harassment, antagonistic feelings, and friends disassociating themselves with LGBTIQ+ individuals took place at school. According to the survey of the Human Rights Campaign Foundation (2012), the percentage of teen suicides classifies lesbian and gay teens as an at-risk group. This is so because members of this group experiences significantly higher rates of suicidal ideation and attempts compared to their heterosexual peers, as stated in the LGBTQIA+ Health Education Center (2018). This elevated risk is not due to their sexual orientation itself but rather stems from a combination of factors such as social isolation, family and peer rejection, bullying, victimization, discrimination, and a lack of access to affirming and supportive environments, as researched by The Trevor Project (2024). These experiences have a direct effect on social and emotional development and well-being, making it crucial for school leadership to be aware of and understand the weight of their responsibility.

The researcher, observing the lack of local research in this field, was motivated to explore if and how members of SLTs in church schools develop and/or manage supportive social networks when encountering LGBTIQ+ individuals who may be at any point on the spectrum, ranging from not being aware of their own sexual orientation or identity to being fully aware. This is undergirded by the model of homosexual identity formation outlined by Cass (1979) and D'Augelli (1994).

Cass' model of homosexual identity formation (1979) outlines a linear, six-stage process: identity confusion, comparison, tolerance, acceptance, pride, and synthesis, through which individuals move from initial awareness of same-sex attraction to fully integrating their sexual orientation as one aspect of self. In contrast, D'Augelli's (1994) model views identity development as a lifelong, non-linear process shaped by social contexts, with six interactive processes such as exiting heterosexual identity, developing personal LGB identity,

developing a social LGB identity, coming out to family, forming intimate relationships, and entering the LGB community (Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, 2022).

Unlike Cass's sequential stages, D'Augelli's model allows for movement between processes at any point, emphasizing the influence of environment, relationships, and culture on the development of identity. Upholding that the principles and aims of education clearly emphasize the importance of learning to live in a community, and convinced that Christianity is about sowing the seed of love, which is also cultivated in church schools, the researcher wished to assess the awareness and skills that members of SLTs in church schools possess to promote an inclusive LGBTIQ+ culture and to be able to recognize the complexity of individuals and accompany them in their personal journey. By integrating Cass and D'Augelli's models, church schools can operate their mission to "cultivate love" through evidence-based inclusivity. This requires SLTs to balance theological principles with psychological frameworks, ensuring LGBTIQ+ students are neither marginalized nor pressured to conform. Such an approach not only aligns with educational goals but also embodies the Christian call to "bear one another's burdens" (CPVD, n.d., Galatians 6:2).

Methodology

Research Paradigm, Approach, and Design

This study adopted an interpretive research paradigm, grounded in a subjective ontology that acknowledges reality as socially constructed. An inductive approach was employed, prioritizing the exploration of participants' lived experiences, cultural patterns, and perspectives through qualitative methods. The narrative inquiry design aligned with the interpretivist philosophy, emphasizing the co-construction of meaning between the researcher and participants. As a cross-sectional case study, data were collected at a single point in time across two church secondary schools with pseudonyms School A and School B, enabling a focused examination of variables related to inclusivity and leadership practices. Table 1 summarizes the demographics of the study. The data collected from each method were analyzed separately and then compared, allowing for a more comprehensive and validated understanding of the findings. Triangulation was achieved through a multi-method design combining semi-structured interviews and focus groups, ensuring rich, holistic insights (Cohen et al., 2018).

Table 1*Demographics of the study*

Participant Demographics	
Heads of Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 participants (1 lay, 1 cleric) • Age: 50–60 • 8+ years in leadership roles • Practicing Catholics
SLT Members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mixed gender • 8+ years teaching experience • Roles: safeguarding, inclusion, pastoral care, counselling
Educators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mix of qualified teachers (warranted) and LSEs (diploma holders) • Teaching experience: 5–15+ years • Subjects: Biology, Maths, languages, PSCE
Students	10 Year 10 students: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 boys from boys' school • 5 girls from girls' school

Data collection was conducted in two church secondary schools. In-depth interviews and focus groups were conducted with each school: the first phase involved a semi-structured interview with the respective Head of School, and the second phase comprised of separate focus groups, respectively SLT members, teachers, and students. The gathered raw data were then transcribed and later coded to elicit the themes, allowing for a thematic analysis to be carried out. Interviews and focus groups help to elicit data and generate a broad overview of an issue of particular concern to a group (Mack et al., 2005). An advantage of these methods is the use of open-ended questions allowing the participants to explain in their own words. Another advantage is that they allow the researcher the flexibility to probe into the participants' responses by asking why and how.

Ethical Considerations

Participants were briefed on study aims, and informed consent letters were distributed and obtained. Confidentiality and anonymization of identities were assured. Each participant was given the right to withdraw from the study at any point.

Rationale for Methods

The semi-structured interviews and focus groups allowed participants to articulate their perspectives in their own words, fostering depth through open-ended questions (Mack et al., 2005). This approach aligned with the interpretivist emphasis on understanding context-specific social phenomena. The cross-sectional design provided a "snapshot" of attitudes and practices at a specific time, while triangulation enhanced validity by combining multiple data sources.

Results and Analysis

The study aimed to assess the awareness, skills, and practices of stakeholders in Maltese church secondary schools in fostering an inclusive LGBTIQ+ culture. It specifically explored how school leadership teams (SLTs), educators, and students perceive and address inclusivity challenges while balancing Catholic values and educational principles. The data revealed five key themes:

1. **Perceptions of LGBTIQ+ Inclusion in Malta:** Students felt that Malta lacks a truly inclusive culture for LGBTIQ+ individuals and emphasized the importance of initiating change at the school and community level.
2. **Role and Identity of Church Schools:** Church schools were seen as responsible for guiding students with values and holistic education, yet students questioned whether these institutions adequately prepared them for life beyond school.
3. **Relationships with School Leadership:** Many students expressed reluctance to confide in SLT members, perceiving them as distant or primarily authoritative rather than approachable and supportive.
4. **Curriculum and Policy Gaps:** Participants highlighted shortcomings in the curriculum and existing school policies regarding LGBTIQ+ inclusivity.
5. **Uniforms and School Facilities:** Issues related to school uniforms and facilities were identified as additional barriers to creating a more inclusive environment.

The following analysis is based on themes identified from the students' focus group discussions, aimed at addressing the research questions.

Question 1 - Role of the SLT in Supporting an Inclusive LGBTIQ+ Culture

When asked how the students would rate the inclusivity of LGBTIQ+ issues in their schools, their answers ranged between three and five out of a total of ten. These answers reveal shortcomings towards the inclusive LGBTIQ+ culture in their respective schools. This was justified by the reason that the SLT is not a point of reference, so a student or staff member would not confide in them sexual orientation or gender identity. Furthermore, respondents added that there is a lack of support from the SLT and that the SLT members are seen as authoritative figures, except for the head of one school, who was described by using positive attributes.

The above is supported by existing research, as despite an improvement over the years, until a few years ago, a student would not reveal their sexual orientation or gender identity in a school (Nelson-Jones, 2016). Meanwhile, Jadwin-Cakmak et al. (2015) found that more young people are coming out and are generally younger when they do. The ILGA (ILGA – Europe et al., 2023), which is an index that ranks European countries based on indicators consisting of the presence or absence of laws, ranked Malta in first place with a score of

92.93 per cent, in comparison to its ranking in 2011 at 35 per cent. This reflected a dynamic shift in LGBTIQ+ rights. However, as Bradford and Clark (2012) stated, youths experience difficulties accepting their own sexual orientation and reconciling their sexuality with their faith. Informants from a two-year study reported that coming out is only one step in one's spiritual journey towards an integrated identity of their individuality embracing the identities of being part of the LGBTIQ+ group and being a Catholic (Deguara, 2021). From the data collected, it was noted that when material such as leaflets are distributed or guest speakers invited by the school's SLT to talk about sensitive topics which are deemed sensitive, such as abortion, this makes it harder for students to come out. Furthermore, the students remarked that the guest speakers the SLT invite often present information that is not always accurate and mainly mention the cons. One student described that when a student does come out, they are "labelled" [immarkat], making them feel humiliated. Half of the student participants said that when coming out or confiding at school, they were dismissed and were told that, "It's just a phase." The case of a student who transitioned and left the school reveals the low level of commitment towards inclusive LGBTIQ+ culture. The male students revealed that life would be very difficult for that person if they were to attend the same school, that they would not be accepted and probably leave the school. A student suggested that, "It will not be in your favour if you choose to remain here. You wouldn't even want to set foot here" [lanqas jaqbillek li tibqa' hawn. Lanqas tersaq 'l hawn ma trid]. Even more so, negative remarks and taunting towards students who form part of the LGBTIQ+ would take place, which SLT members are aware of, as students commented upon, and which results in a negative climate. Hearing pejorative remarks in school can have negative effects on students. Forty-six per cent of LGBTIQ students in the MGRM survey (Pizmony-Levy, 2017) reported hearing other students make derogatory remarks. Inconsistent intervention by school leaders when hearing biased language in school may possibly send the message to students that homophobic language is tolerated. Furthermore, school staff may themselves be legitimizing the use of homophobic language. All this contributes towards a hostile learning environment.

Half of the student participants demonstrated an awareness that any incident occurring within a Church school, especially one with negative implications, would likely attract widespread attention and publicity. This understanding highlights their perception of the heightened scrutiny that such schools are under and suggests a sensitivity to the reputational impact that negative events may have on their educational community.

A student in the focus group stated that if a teacher's mannerisms were eccentric and indicated tendencies of homosexuality, and caused a student to feel uncomfortable, the SLT will tackle this issue by speaking to the particular teacher. Studies by Neely (2015), Endo et al. (2010) and Ferfolja (2009) reveal that educators who form part of the LGBTIQ+ community are often preoccupied with how students' parents perceive them. Borg (2015) pointed out that these educators, in particular, adopt a dual identity and strive to maintain invisibility since it is the safer option for a stable career. In Malta, the employment of teachers in

Maltese church schools is restricted to candidates who are “practicing Catholics” and who have committed themselves to “Catholic life choices” (Borg, 2015), so gay teachers’ entry to employment in this sector is therefore compromised. Teachers with this dual identity have been referred to as “splitters” by Connell (2015). Such splitters remain closeted, keeping their sexual and professional identities distinct in order to safeguard themselves and retain their job. However, this perpetuates the collective shame of identifying as an LGBTIQ+ individual and contributes to the invisibility phenomena (Connell, 2015). This double life could have a negative effect on one’s mental health (Ferfolja, 2009). Another negative consequence of this is portraying being gay as having something wrong with one’s sexual orientation (Connell, 2015). Both Gray (2013) and Ferfolja and Hopkins (2013) declared that a positive rapport between the teacher and the students is attained when the former presents their authentic self. To support this, the data collected from School A showed that when a trainee teacher who was transgendered carried out the teaching practice at their church school, it resulted in a positive experience for both parties. The students felt at ease to ask questions, knowing that the answers would be from first-hand experience and also because they looked up to this person as a role model with integrity and with a level of education and academic background. This complements the term “knitter”, which Connell (2015) described as an educator who forms part of the LGBTIQ+ community and incorporates their sexual orientation and gender identity into their teaching by adopting strategies which reflect their sense of responsibility in being role models.

Question 2 - Knowledge, Skills and Tools of SLT Members

The student participants identified what the SLT needs in order to support an LGBTIQ+ inclusive culture and the word “evolve” surfaced: “The SLT needs to evolve. They should have more skills, awareness, and training to really support us.” This student’s call for SLTs to develop greater skills and awareness aligns with international recommendations that effective LGBTIQ+ inclusion requires comprehensive staff training and ongoing professional development (National Education Union, 2022). The need to evolve implies that the SLT need skills, awareness, knowledge and training as well as experience to handle issues related to LGBTIQ+. Participants added that a member from the SLT needs to know when to refer a student and to whom, and to possess the necessary skill set and expertise. The need for clear referral protocols and knowledgeable staff is echoed in best practice guidelines, which emphasize the importance of staff knowing how and when to connect students with appropriate support services (Additio App, 2023). Additionally, participants also remarked that, “The SLT should be more proactive, not just wait for things to happen.” They described their past experiences of the student council putting forward their recommendations on school affairs and being met with disappointment and frustration when they received no acknowledgment. Research stresses that school leaders must adopt a proactive approach to inclusion, rather than waiting for issues to arise (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2020 National Education Union, 2022).

Question 3 – Opportunities and Challenges Faced by SLT Members

Besides the student participants showing awareness that if a negative incident related to an LGBTIQ+ issue takes place in a church school, it will be widely publicized, they expressed the need for the SLT to benefit from a skill set to increase the level of knowledge in LGBTIQ+ issues and emotional intelligence. The results from the students' participants revealed that the curriculum is also an aspect which needs to be addressed. As one participant said, "Our lessons and textbooks never talk about LGBTIQ+ people or families. It's always just boy-girl relationships and traditional families, like nothing else exists." The students stated that the mentality which emanated from the curriculum reflects the mindset of the older generation, where career and marriage are considered to be the main achievements. Among the classes in which students had been taught positive things about LGBTIQ+ related topics were PSCD, Religion, History/Social Studies and English. However, as one participant highlighted, "We need more time in PSCD to talk about these topics. It shouldn't just be one teacher's job; it should be something we all learn about in different subjects." Another essential point is the uniform and facilities. There has been a reform in the uniform at the girls' church school, where the students are given a choice to wear either trousers or skirts. However, this was mainly for decency purposes, since there are male educators: "Even though we can wear trousers or skirts now, it was mostly about decency, not about including everyone. The bathrooms and changing rooms are a big problem, especially for students who are trans or don't fit in." Restrooms and changing rooms also leave much to be desired, as all the students mentioned. This was one of the reasons that might have led to the dropout of the student who transitioned: "Some students have dropped out because there aren't gender-neutral bathrooms or because the school isn't co-ed. It makes things really hard for anyone who's different." Another reason is that the vast majority of church secondary schools are not co-ed. This is corroborated by Mallia (2020), who stated that transgender students drop out of school since not all schools are co-ed and due to the lack of gender-neutral toilet facilities. The MGRM survey (2017) claimed that LGBTIQ+ students avoided PE lessons and locker rooms, bathrooms, as well as café and lunch areas.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Limitations

This study faced several limitations. Researching LGBTIQ+ issues in church secondary schools proved challenging due to the topic's sensitivity, resulting in hesitance and limited cooperation from some schools. Several schools declined participation or were slow to respond, causing delays and reducing the sample size. The research was limited to just two schools, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to other church schools in Malta and Gozo. Additionally, the use of a convenience sample may not fully represent the wider educator population. The lack of local research and data further constrained the study's scope. Employing quantitative methods, such as online surveys, could have broadened

participation and provided deeper insights. Future research should expand to more schools for comparative analysis. Despite these limitations, the findings align with existing literature.

Recommendations

The analysis of the themes helped to identify several recommendations that can help to draw up the skills and knowledge the SLT needs to handle LGBTIQ+ issues: the school community needs to be sensitized to LGBTIQ+ issues to create safer environments; safer spaces need to be provided within schools for LGBTIQ+ individuals; and training and informative talks provided to all stakeholders will help educate the school community and bring about more inclusivity and awareness, reducing stigmas, homophobia, and transphobia. In addition, professional formation for the SLT needs to be provided since they lead to social change and ensure social justice within the school. The SLT is invited to become more knowledgeable about issues pertaining to LGBTIQ+ members of their school community and the facts and statistics regarding incidents that LGBTIQ+ individuals encounter at school. They are also invited to work on their emotional intelligence and empathy skills to develop supportive relationships with LGBTIQ+ members and be a point of reference when students need to confide. The curriculum should include topics related to LGBTIQ+ issues, and this should be done across all subjects, using gender-neutral vocabulary and exposure to all forms of relationships to dissipate the strong sense of heteronormativity that is hegemonic. The collected data also revealed a need for the implementation of existing national policies that specifically address LGBTIQ+ issues, as well as the necessity of creating policy and/or guidelines tailored to church schools.

Adherence to these policies will enhance the school's commitment to an inclusive LGBTIQ+ culture and ensure zero tolerance for any form of abuse towards any LGBTIQ+ individual. In turn, this will permeate to all members of the school community, and increase the SLT's assertiveness to provide for the needs of these individuals. Units should be offered in teacher training and to qualified teachers on LGBTIQ+ issues, especially since SLT members were teachers themselves in the past. Implementation of these recommendations will enhance the learning experience of each member of the school community, especially LGBTIQ+ members, who will no longer have to suffer from any form of abuse.

Conclusions

The review of the NCF (MEDE, 2012) was crucial in moving towards practices in the educational system, particularly in schools, that revolve around inclusion, empowering students, improving networking and decentralization of services, addressing mixed ability and differentiated teaching due to new realities. The requirement to improve overall student performance while serving more diverse student populations placed the onus on school leadership, which needs to be effective to ensure efficiency and equity (Pont et al., 2008). With this come many responsibilities and accountabilities as school leaders wear many

hats to ensure that their school community upholds a sense of safety by creating conditions for the inclusion of all voices, including those of LGBTIQ+ members (Cohn-Vargas et al., 2021). It has been shown that schools can be unsafe places for LGBTIQ+ students, while on the other hand, a safe climate at school is a precondition for learning and helps to improve the educational outcomes of students.

This research delved into gauging the current situation of the leadership role in supporting the inclusive LGBTIQ+ culture in two Maltese church secondary schools. A qualitative research approach was chosen, and data collected from the students' focus groups revealed that adhering to inclusive policies on behalf of all stakeholders, upskilling staff members, providing information to students and all stakeholders, creating a safe climate in school, refining the curriculum to reflect LGBTIQ+ issues, and celebrating diversity need to be monitored and evaluated by the SLT. The researcher believes that this is vital to gauge the level of inclusion and to ensure the success of the SLT's hard efforts.

Notes on Contributor

Pamela Fenech is a head of department for primary curriculum where she supports, manages and trains educators to implement methodologies, cross-curricular and STEM approaches and develop school development plans. She delivers professional development sessions to educators in formative and summative assessment and implementing the curriculum of primary subjects. She participated in the recent Homework National Policy where the objectives, principles and significance of homework programmes for this specific learning need and graduated as a primary teacher. She holds a master's degree in Applied Educational Leadership with her research focusing on the role of the senior leadership team in supporting an inclusive LGBTIQ+ culture in church secondary schools in Malta.

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