

## Original Research Article

# Breaking Barriers and Nurturing Acceptance: Exploring School Teachers' Knowledge and Awareness About LGBTQ+ Communities

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** LGBTQ+ communities are constantly facing disparities related to social stigma and denial of human rights. Among youth, the formative years of upper primary and high school are pivotal for self-discovery. School teachers have a key role in creating a supportive environment for LGBTQ+ students. This study aims to explore the level of knowledge and awareness among school teachers regarding LGBTQ+ communities and their rights, with the ultimate goal of developing strategies to improve teacher education and support for LGBTQ+ students.

**Materials and Methods:** A cross-sectional study was conducted among 255 school teachers aged 23 to 60 years from 17 schools in Thrissur district in Kerala, India, based on convenient sampling techniques. A semi-validated questionnaire was distributed among school teachers of high school and upper primary classes. Based on the scores obtained they were categorized as good, average and poor. Chi-square test was used for the analysis.

**Results:** Out of the total respondents, 56.5% exhibited average knowledge, while 53.7% showed poor awareness. Notably, a statistically significant finding emerged, indicating a paradoxical scenario where a majority possessed commendable knowledge, yet concurrently showcased a significantly poor level of awareness (p value= 0.002). Specifically, as age increased, there was a concurrent decrease in both knowledge and awareness levels. Subgroup analysis delineated a statistically significant distinction, with the younger age groups (< 40 years) manifesting higher levels of knowledge compared to their older counterparts (> 51 years) (p value= 0.013).

**Conclusions:** This study highlights the lack of LGBTQ+ knowledge and awareness among teachers. Introducing Comprehensive Sexuality Education in schools is crucial for a safe environment enhancing LGBTQ+ youth's well-being and academic outcomes. It is our collective responsibility to ensure all students feel seen, heard, and valued, irrespective of sexual orientation or gender identity.

**Keywords:** Awareness, Gender, Knowledge, LGBTQ+, Sex, Teachers

### INTRODUCTION

“Gender” and “sex” are two terminologies which are constantly used interchangeably. Though these two different attributes add to a person’s identity, the society at large is still not aware that sex is a biological concept while gender is a social concept. Gender is considered to be an amalgamation of multiple elements which ranges from

physical, biological and mental to behavioral attributes according to Warnke.<sup>1</sup>

LGBTQ+ is an acronym meaning “Lesbian”, “Gay”, “Bisexual”, “Transgender”, “Queer” community which is a broad coalition of groups that are diverse with gender and sexual orientation. ‘LESBIAN’ refers to women who are sexually attracted to women. ‘GAY’ refers to men who are sexually attracted to men. ‘BISEXUAL’ refers to people who

are sexually attracted to both men and women. 'TRANSGENDER' is an umbrella term used to describe people with a wide range of identities-including transsexual people, people who identify as third gender, and others whose appearance and characteristics are perceived as gender atypical and whose sense of their own gender is different to the sex that they were assigned at birth. 'QUEER' is an umbrella term which is commonly used to define lesbian, gay, bi, trans, and other people and institutions on the margins of mainstream culture.<sup>2,3</sup> This community is constantly dealing with disparities related to social stigma and denial of human rights.

Even the presence of “transgender persons act 2019”, which seeks to recognize the identity of the person and prohibit discrimination, does not seem to ensure protection to this community. Identification of one's own sexual identity or gender identity begins very early in life but self-disclosure of the same is a long psychological process which is described using the metaphor “coming out”.

Upper primary and high school educational period is a crucial period in a student's life as it is the time where he/she identifies themselves. Teachers have a pivotal role in supporting their students during this period. School should be a safe environment that promotes learning and development. However, for LGBTQ youth, school can be a dangerous place. Victimization for youth's (presumed) sexual or gender identity is prevalent, and often even perpetrated by teachers and school personnel.<sup>4</sup> Having comprehensive sexuality education in school may provide a safer school climate with teachers and students who are aware of sexual diversity issues.<sup>4</sup> It is important for teachers to understand the different labels used within LGBTQ communities for two reasons. First, many stigmas are still associated with LGBTQ individuals, and much of this is due to a lack of understanding that breeds prejudice and discrimination. Second, teachers without this set of knowledge may struggle to fully understand the range of identities in these communities, putting them at a disadvantage when it comes to supporting their students as allies.<sup>5</sup>

The current study addresses a noticeable research gap by actively exploring the present status of previous studies both in India and internationally, which has not been comprehensively examined. This research endeavors to contribute significantly by concentrating on the knowledge and awareness among school teachers about LGBTQ communities. Unlike previous studies that primarily aimed to assess knowledge, perception, and attitudes, our study specifically focuses on enhancing understanding and awareness. This targeted approach is integral for dispelling stigma and rectifying misconceptions, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and informed educational environment for LGBTQ students.

The purpose of the present research is to assess the knowledge and awareness about LGBTQ among school teachers. The results of the study would definitely help to plan a policy regarding sexual education in schools not only for students but for teachers too.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Study design

This cross-sectional study was done among school teachers in Thrissur, Kerala. The study was conducted under the Department of Physiology. The participants included were both male and female teachers of upper primary classes and high schools of age group 23 to 60 years. All those not willing to participate in the study were excluded. After obtaining Institutional Ethics Committee clearance participants were recruited for the study. Based on the mean and standard deviation of knowledge and awareness scores observed in an earlier publication "Attitudes towards and Knowledge about Homosexuality among Medical Students in Zagreb",<sup>6</sup> with 95% confidence level and 5% relative allowable error minimum sample size comes to 255.

### Tools

A validated semi-structured questionnaire, which included proforma, questions related to knowledge and awareness about LGBTQ+ communities, were distributed among the research participants. The socio-demographic data collected were age, sex, marital status, religion, occupation, name of school and teaching class. Of the 20 questions in the questionnaire, 10 were to assess the knowledge and the remaining to assess the awareness of the participants. The questionnaire was prepared by referring to other research papers and also from articles of the American Psychological Association.<sup>4,7</sup>

### Validation of questionnaire

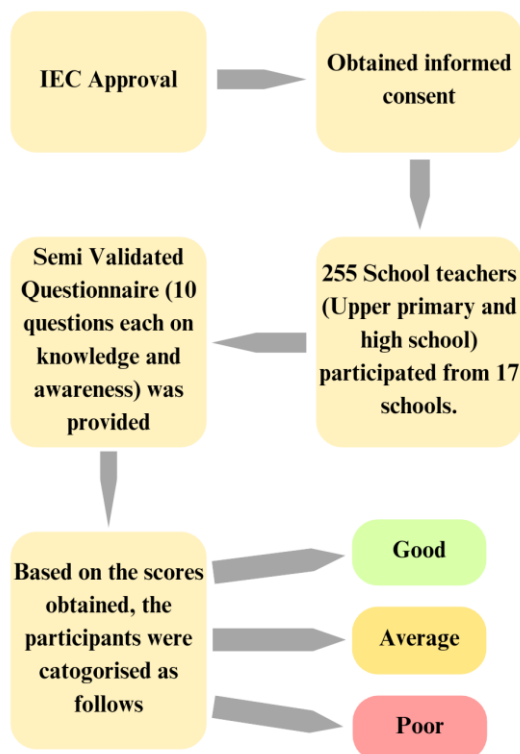
The validation process for the questionnaire involved the following steps:

1. Item Selection for Questionnaire: This involved referencing questionnaires from previous studies and reviewing various articles on LGBTQ knowledge and awareness.
2. First Draft Preparation: The initial version of the questionnaire was created based on the selected items.
3. Expert Revision: The first draft underwent extensive revision by a committee comprising sexuality educators, psychiatrists, research scholars, psychologists, and social workers.
4. Pilot Study: A pilot study was conducted with 20 respondents to assess the questionnaire's effectiveness and gather preliminary feedback.

5. Final Draft Formation: Incorporating insights from the pilot study and expert revisions, the final version of the questionnaire was formulated.

## Procedure

School authorities were informed about the method of study and proper consent was obtained from them. Prior to starting the survey, the participants were given a brief introduction about the study.



## Statistical analysis

IBM SPSS version 25 used to enter the survey data obtained. Chi-square test was used for the analysis, the p value less than 0.05 is considered statistically significant. The data was first analyzed on the basic sociodemographic factors like age, sex, religion etc. and later on became more specific with the knowledge and awareness questions.

## RESULTS

The present study was designed with an aim to assess the knowledge and awareness about LGBTQ community among school teachers. The median age of the participants was 42 years. Of the 255 teachers who participated in this survey, 231 (90.6%) were females [Table-1].

Table-2 shows the comparison between knowledge and awareness among school teachers. Only 10.5 % of the study participants had good knowledge and awareness. While

50.9% of the study participants who had good knowledge had very poor awareness. In all the three categories of knowledge (good, average and poor) the awareness was found to be poor in the majority and this was statistically significant with a p value of 0.002.

**Table-1: Demographic characteristics of participants**

Variable	Number (N=255)
<b>Age</b>	
< 40 years	102
41-50 years	100
> 51 years	53
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	24
Female	231
<b>Marital Status</b>	
Married	241
Unmarried	14
<b>Religion</b>	
Hindu	94
Christian	155
Muslim	6
<b>Teaching Class</b>	
Upper Primary Class	95
High School	160

**Table-2: Comparison of Knowledge and Awareness among school teachers**

Knowledge	Awareness			$\chi^2$ Value	p Value
	Good (%)	Average (%)	Poor (%)		
Good (%)	10.5	38.6	50.9	17.002	0.002
Average (%)	20.8	32.6	46.5		
Poor (%)	7.4	16.7	75.9		

On checking the effect of variables on knowledge, it was seen that younger age groups (< 40 years) had more knowledge than older people (> 51 years) and it was statistically significant (p value=0.013). 37.5% of males and 58.4% of females were having average knowledge. On analyzing the effect of teaching class, a major proportion of

both upper primary and high school teachers were having average knowledge (Table-3).

Variables	Knowledge						$\chi^2$ Value	p value
	Good		Average		Poor			
	n	%	n	%	n	%		
Age								
< 40 years	29	28.4	60	58.8	13	12.7	12.742	0.013
41-50 years	19	19	59	59	22	22		
> 51 years	9	17	25	47.2	19	35.8		
Sex								
Male	7	29.2	9	37.5	8	33.3	4.088	0.13
Female	50	21.6	135	58.4	46	19.9		
Teaching Class								
Upper Primary Class	23	24.2	52	54.7	20	21.1	0.315	0.854
High School	34	21.3	92	57.5	34	21.3		

Table-3: Effect of variables on knowledge

Similarly, on checking the effect of variables on awareness, it was clearly understood that as age increases awareness about LGBTQ communities were very less. 70.8% males and 51.9% females were having poor awareness. 60% of upper primary teachers and 50% of high school teachers were having poor awareness (Table-4).

The survey questionnaire was distributed to participants from 17 schools. The survey included questions assessing the knowledge and awareness about LGBTQ communities; LGBTQ terminologies, their rights and knowing the facts. On analysing each knowledge question, it was identified that the majority were having knowledge about the LGBTQ terminologies. Only 15.7% (n=40) were knowing what was intersex. A major proportion of teachers were not able to differentiate intersex and transgender. Also, only 36.9% knew what 'sex' refers to. It shows that most of the teachers were not sure about what is sex and gender and are intermixing these terms (Figure-1). Among awareness questions, most of the teachers (62.4%) were aware that being LGBT+ is not a disease/mental disorder and was not

curable. At the same time 47.5% of people thought that men who display behaviours that the society ascribes to women are labelled gay and vice versa are labelled lesbian (Figure-2).

Table-4: Effect of variables on awareness

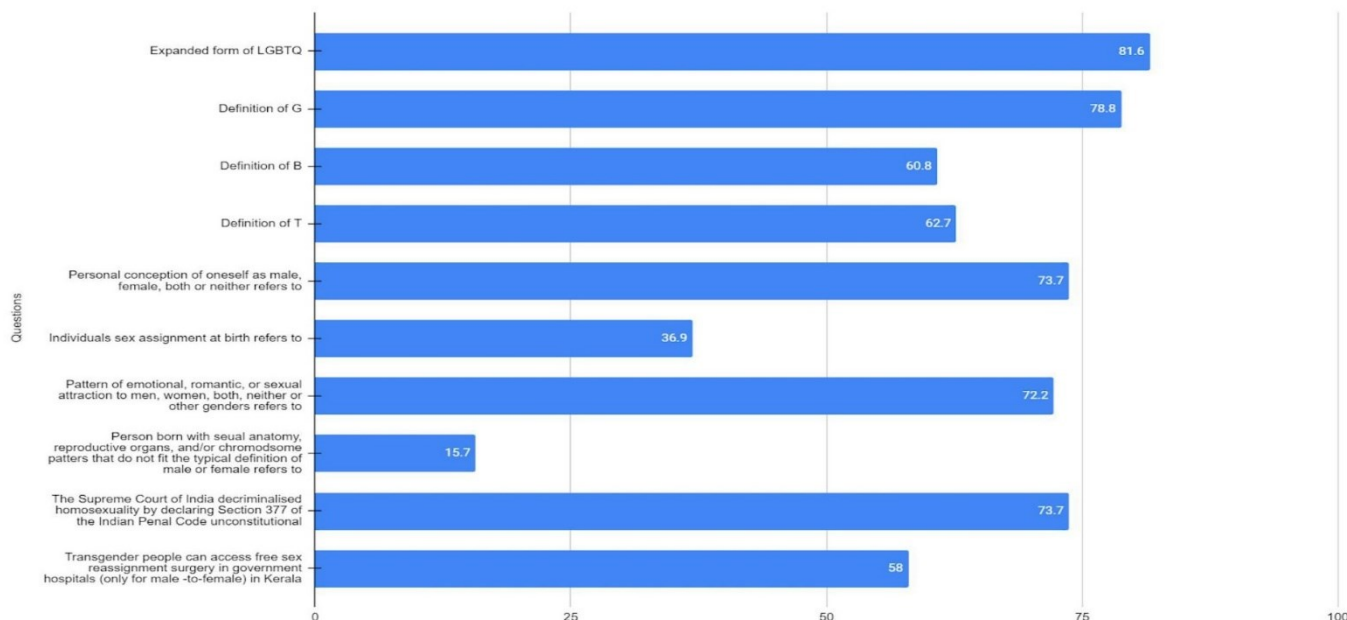
Variables	Awareness						$\chi^2$ Value	p value
	Good		Average		Poor			
	n	%	n	%	n	%		
Age								
< 40 years	19	18.6	31	30.4	52	51	4.865	0.301
41-50 years	15	15	35	35	50	50		
> 51 years	6	11.3	12	22.6	35	66		
Sex								
Male	3	12.5	4	16.7	17	70.8	3.293	0.13
Female	37	16	74	32	120	51.9		
Teaching Class								
Upper Primary Class	11	11.6	27	28.4	57	60	2.97	0.226
High School	29	18.1	51	31.9	80	50		

DISCUSSION

Gender binary, a system of naming and stereotyping differences between boys and girls is learned and reproduced by schools. Schools which are considered as “second home” can become an unsafe environment for transgender students as noted by Taylor et al.<sup>8</sup> Their research confirmed that over 75% of Lesbian, Gay and Bi-sexual youth and 95% of Transgender students do not feel safe at school compared to 20% of heterosexual students.<sup>8</sup> This could be attributed to bullying not only by students but the teachers too. Knowledge about LGBTQ communities in school teachers plays a vital role in supporting such students and it also can affect student's perception towards sexual and gender minorities. School and education reforms should incorporate anti-discrimination work as a key component.

Figure-1 shows the assessment of knowledge among the study participants about LGBTQ community. A proper understanding of the LGBTQ terminology is the basis of a friendly climate for LGBTQ people. In a similar study conducted among medical students by Ninad Nagrale et al, all students were having knowledge & understanding regarding terms lesbian, gay, bisexual, homosexual & heterosexual. 13% students (from first year) were unaware of the term transgender.<sup>9,10</sup> Sexual identity, sexual orientation and gender identity are terms commonly used by people but researchers have found that many are not aware

about the difference between these terminologies hence they end up using it interchangeably. It is important to know that sex is a biological concept and gender is a social concept. Sexual orientation is about our physical, emotional and/or romantic attractions to others.<sup>11</sup> The Supreme Court of India had decriminalized homosexuality by declaring Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. This historic decision that discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is a fundamental violation of rights was known to only 73.7 % of the teachers.



**Fig 1 : Assessment of Knowledge**

Figure-2 shows assessment of awareness about LGBTQ community in school teachers. For all the questions it was noted that about 25% of the participants had neutral responses which is a matter to be addressed as it shows even teachers are not aware of the nuances related to LGBTQ community. Awareness among school teachers is very important for the protection of students at school. Social justice and policies do exist in school settings but they are often neglected or ignored. Kosciw et al in 2010 reported that 84% of LGBT students report being bullied in school.<sup>10</sup> Another study in 2014 reported that 82% of students were verbally harassed at school because of their sexual orientation, and over 18% reported being physically assaulted.<sup>12</sup>

From the present study it was noted that only 62.4% of teachers consider that LGBTQ is not a disease/disorder. There are teachers having misconceptions that sexual orientations are learnt from peers, all those who cross-dress

are transgenders and men who behave in such a way that society ascribes to women are gay and vice versa. This clearly shows the lack of awareness and importance of sex education among the teaching fraternity. Comprehensive sexuality education is a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality.<sup>13</sup> It enables young people to protect and advocate for their health, well-being and dignity by providing them with a necessary toolkit of knowledge, attitudes and skills.<sup>14</sup> Study of Ninad Nagrale et al showed that most students are in agreement that teaching scientific facts about LGBT as a part of sexuality education in schools (91%) are effective ways to address the problem of discrimination.<sup>9</sup>

Another important aspect is that pronouns are the way that we refer to people in place of their name or in third person. When you use someone's correct pronouns, it serves to create an inclusive environment where you demonstrate that

you care for and respect them.<sup>15</sup> In our study, 62.7% of teachers agree that we should ask for someone's pronouns rather than assuming it. Also, the majority of teachers are aware about the term transsexual which describes those transgenders who sought medical intervention for gender affirmation. This study shows that there is a broad range of awareness and understanding of LGBTQ realities among our school teachers. All the information available from the study is insightful and it indicates that educators need support and explicit LGBTQ training about how to create and sustain positive spaces for LGBTQ youth and allies in schools. Training of educators would ensure that they enable students to have broader choices about who they felt themselves to be hence develop a pedagogy system that does not oppress but embraces and honors all learners.

In our ongoing efforts to enhance the depth of our study, we are strategically planning a qualitative continuation. This approach would bring a more nuanced and comprehensive

understanding of the factors influencing LGBTQ knowledge and awareness among school teachers. Qualitative methods, such as interviews and focus groups, would be employed to gather insights that go beyond quantitative metrics offering a richer contextualization of the findings.

Recently the Tamil Nadu Government has informed the Madras High Court that rules to protect LGBTQ+ rights would be announced and put into force by December end. Government is planning to address the issue at grassroots level by educating LGBTQ+ issues in school curriculum, gender neutral restrooms and separate columns for transsexuals in applications, also banning 'conversion therapy' and labeling it as a crime. Besides introducing the issues in the academic curricula, teachers too will be given training on how to address the topic.<sup>16</sup> Thus, Tamil Nadu becomes the first in India to bring such reform.

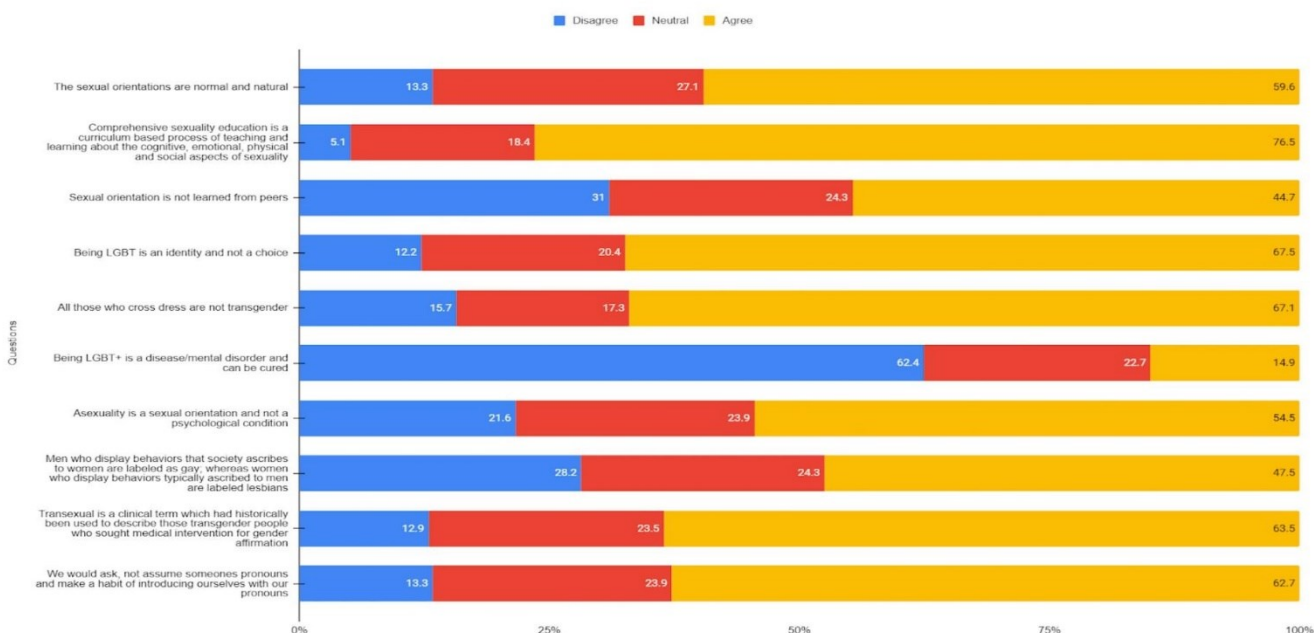


Fig 2 : Assessment of Awareness

## CONCLUSIONS

This study showed that upper primary and high school teachers are having less knowledge and awareness about LGBTQ communities and their rights which would be hazardous to the developing society. Introducing Comprehensive Sexuality Education in the educational curriculum will be beneficial for students as well as their teachers. When teachers acquire proper knowledge and awareness regarding LGBT it will automatically reach their

students in some or other way. Thus, helps to build a LGBTQ friendly society in the coming years.

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