

## **WORKING TITLE: Fluid identities: what do we mean by ‘safe spaces’?**

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Nothing embraces and explores fluidity quite like Geography. Tracking the fluidity of motions - the atmosphere, a river, of people. Discovering the fluidity of time - in rocks, on evolution, of seasons. The fluidity of Geography is perhaps easier to see at grand scales, but maybe not so obvious at the smallest: *the personal*. Fluidity in human geography is real and valid, whether it be how we change as individuals through time, how we move spatially, or even how we (and others) perceive personal identities. This article focuses on arguably one of the most fluid: LGBTQIA+ identities, and asks how we can explore them in a safe and geographical way. For the personal and local scales, we use Alice’s school community of Wandsworth in our examples.

### **What do we mean by ‘space’?**

Space is a fundamental concept in human geography and one students can recognise without even realising. Spaces can evoke so many emotions and can be integral in shaping a child. Children themselves can also create spaces that allow them to be happy, sad, angry and relaxed. Spaces can range from a variety of scales, and can range from the desk they sit in, to the classroom and to the school.

### **What makes a ‘safe’ space?**

A safe space can be thought of as one where you can exist without fear or prejudice. Often, this can mean different things to different people. Students often see school as a safe space and creating these within a learning environment is shown to have a good impact on their academic performance (Stonewall, 2017).

At the start of this academic year, Year 7 students were introduced to this concept of space and were asked to describe what space meant to them on a personal scale. Given the timing of the activity, their responses are heavily influenced by their experience at Primary school age. Some examples are provided below:

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## physical geography in the UK! ♥

- 1.
2. False (more than 3 countries in the United Kingdom!)
3. Human geography (a)
4. (missed out) (starter questions)

(we are closest to the Atlantic ocean) (HUMAN GEOGRAPHY)

happy space - comfortable, makes you feel at home, has some comfort, very calm and kind people/respectful people.

Sad space - uncomfortable, rude people, loud, don't enjoy, hard to concentrate and without personal items.

Safe spaces - calm, kind people, supportive people, relaxing, quiet. Old people would want to be with their grandkids or kids.

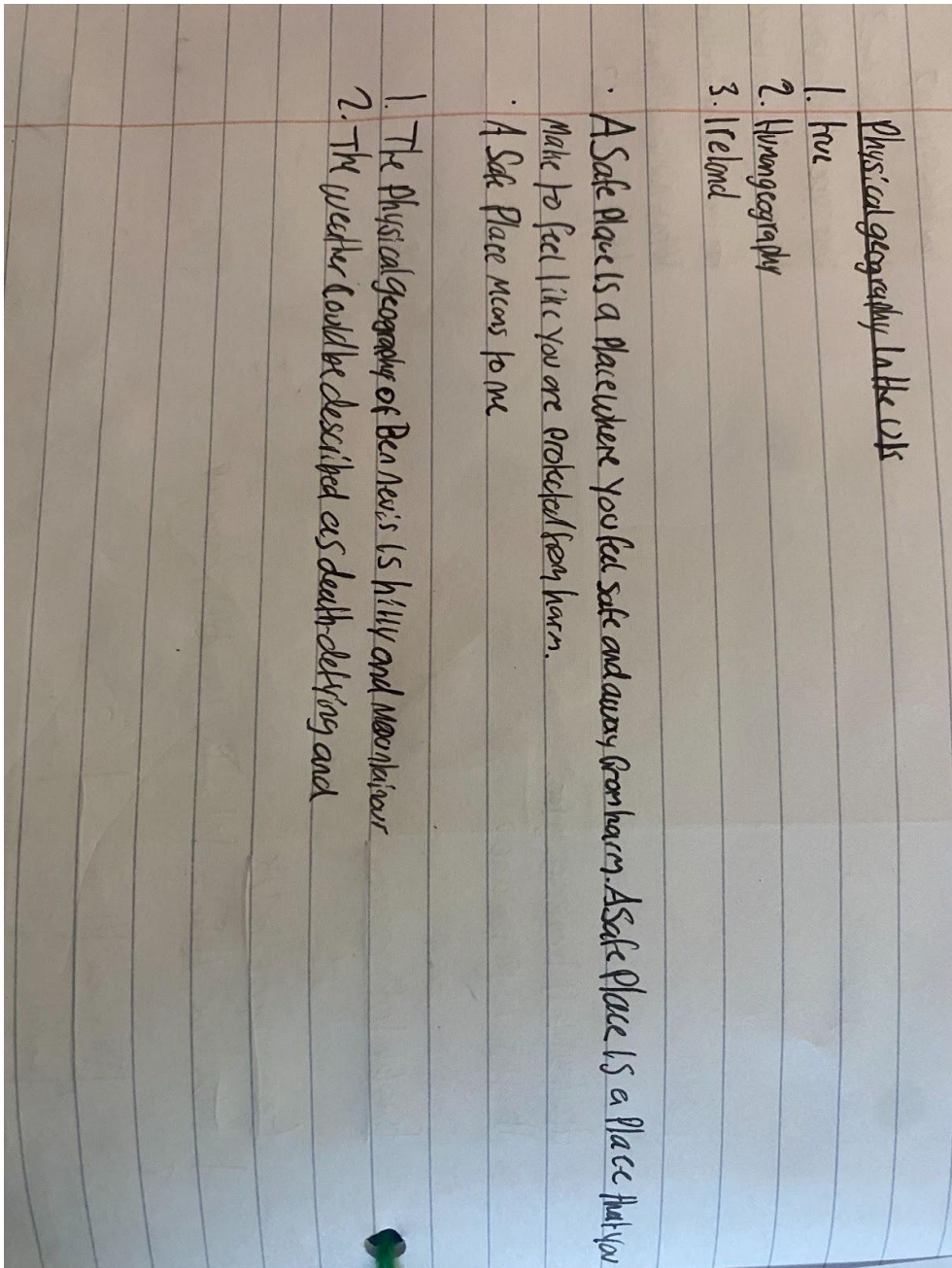
challenge - people who are blind might want a guard dog. LGBTQ people might want to go to a kind/supportive place.

people who can't walk might to go home to rest and take care. Girls might want to go to a salon or makeup place to make them more healthy and beautiful. Boys might want to hang out with their friends. ♥♥

### Weather.

Ben Nevis can be described as "very hard to climb." The weather was so windy and kind of damp, also a bit stormy. I would not like to climb a mountain because I don't like getting really cold or dirty, and I would not take the risk of losing any personal items like my phone, cloths and some more belongings, and I absolutely hate noisy sounds while sleeping.

This example has noted that LGBTQ+ people might want to go to a kind and supportive place, we will explore this later in the article. Stonewall's report (2017) states that 47% of students are bullied as a result of their identity. The student below states that a safe space is one where you are protected from harm.



Often students find illustrating ideas easier to communicate than describing them. The same task was proposed as a homework task and the student used illustration to describe what a safe space meant to them as a LGBTQIA+ person. You can see that having their identity recognised is important to them through the representation of flags on their wall.



Thoughtfully and carefully creating a safe space for seemingly one group of pupils will almost certainly create a safe space for others. Research is emerging that there is substantial overlap between autism and gender diversity, for instance, and likely to be the case with other neurodivergent traits (Dattaro, 2020).

### **Enquiry-based approaches** (*Kit Marie*)

Activities that link exploration of the 'personal scale' as seen above to the local scale make for an inclusive and healthily curious curriculum. This in-turn helps to consolidate a safe learning environment. Enquiry-based approaches are best suited for this. Here are a couple of examples that you can tailor to suit your locale.

#### **a. Exploring personal and lived experiences through discussion: Queering the Map**

‘Queering the Map’ is a unique and powerful website which allows anonymous LGBTQIA+ voices to lay bare their thoughts and feelings. With that in mind, the resource itself is likely *not* age-appropriate for KS1 or KS2 pupils to access *themselves*, but it provides a wealth of personal perspectives that you as the teacher can select from and adapt if necessary.

In preparation, visit [queeringthemap.com](http://queeringthemap.com). There is no search function on the map, so you will need to zoom out, pan to your region and zoom into your school’s catchment area. If you are in an urban area you’ll have more entries to choose from, for more rural areas you may need to expand a little more. Pick out around half-a-dozen short quotes or sentences from longer entries that you are comfortable using verbatim, or can adapt to make age-appropriate. What you choose is up to you. If you are not sure, choose entries which opine about a sense of safety or belonging. Make a note of what kind of geographical environment each entry was made, a residential street? A park? A shopping area?

With the pupils, start by exploring what they think makes different spaces and places safer than others, particularly referencing the type of environments that you have noted from the map. Using the Wandsworth area as an example, you could ask:

- Why might green spaces like Wandsworth Park or Wandsworth Common be popular places to go and meet friends?
- What makes parks and open spaces more safe than built up areas?
- If you could pick a place in our local area, such as... (the environments in your list)... that makes you feel happiest, which would it be and why?
- Which of these places do you think you are more likely to meet people like yourself?

While the above discussion questions may not directly reference LGBTQ+ identities, they do allow the discussion of what might make a ‘safe space’ in the local area. If in your professional judgement you feel some of the entries on ‘Queering the Map’ are adaptable, you could progress the discussion to exploring why people with certain identities, in this case LGBTQ+ identities, feel particular spaces are safer for *them* more than others.

**b. Exploring new data from the 2021 UK Census**

For the first time in its 200-year history, the UK Census included questions about sexual and gender identities. Not only is this vital for addressing representation gaps and allocating resources effectively, it gives validity and visibility to those groups on a national scale (Rackley, 2021). Attempts by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to display data in clear visual formats make for normally difficult to grasp statistics more accessible.

Here is an enquiry mostly suited to Key Stage 2 pupils. Useful prior knowledge for pupils would include LGBTQ+ identities (PSHE), choropleth mapping (Maths, Geography) and what the UK Census is.

	Teaching activities	Learning activities
Visualising and <i>feeling</i> the numbers: What does '1%' mean and what does it look like?	Using materials such as counting blocks or visualisation techniques, help pupils to visualise what 1% looks like. How many classes at school would you need to put together to have enough pupils where at least single one would represent around 1%?	In groups, to recognise and understand what 1% is as a proportion of a group, such as separating one counter from a batch of a hundred. Discussing what would 1% of 200/500 etc look like? How would they feel if they were the one pupil in a group of 100 separate from the rest? Lonely? Special? etc
The UK census map. What is the national picture like?	Access the Census map choose to use either the map for 'Gender identity' ('Gender identity different as sex registered at birth' option) or 'Sexual orientation' ('Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Other LGB' option) found in the 'Identity'	Using their ideas from the visualising proportions such as 1%, what do the pupils notice about the number of people who identify a certain way? Does the census show that such identities are in the majority or minority?

	category on the left-hand menu. Aid recognition of England & Wales, and draw attention to the title and key.	Is the area the school situated in one of the darker colours/higher proportions or lighter colours/lower proportions?
What is our area like?	Click on 'England and Wales' under 'Area' to search for your school's postcode. Resting your mouse cursor over the map will put a pointer on the key for accessibility.	Pupils to use their lived experiences of their area to discuss whether they are/aren't surprised by this, and why.
How does it compare with a contrasting area?	Zoom back out to show the whole map, and guide them to choose a place that they think is the opposite (e.g. central London vs Cumbria etc). Zoom in the area of their choice. Do this a few times.	Do they think their school is in an 'urban' or 'rural' area? Identify areas of the map which seem to be in contrast with their area. Urban areas tend to have a higher proportion of LGBTQ+ identities. Why do they think so?
What does this mean for 'safe spaces'?	Circle back to the discussion at the start of the activity and draw out what patterns they have noticed from the map. Lead a discussion on what makes a safe space? In particular, why are higher proportions found in urban areas.	Recall discussions on whether being a '1%' feels lonely or not. Are you more likely to find someone 'like you' in an urban area or rural one? Picture what a 'safe space' would like in a rural area vs an urban area for people who feel they may be in the minority.

### **Making the classroom a safe space**

Children need to be seen and represented in the classroom and creating a safe space will make sure that they feel included. Often heterononormative language provides barriers within a classroom, as children can feel misrepresented. Heteronormativity means viewing heterosexual people and relationships as the 'norm'. This being said, efforts to be inclusive within the classroom should not be 'tokenistic' and should be embedded into the curriculum (Johnson, 2020). A number of examples of small

changes that can be used within the classroom have been provided below. Language is really powerful and small changes can make such a big difference. Exploring different family roles and genders can make students feel seen. Importantly, teachers should be given tools to direct them to inclusive language, as provided below:

<b><i>Everyday language</i></b>	<b><i>Inclusive Language</i></b>
<i>Boys/Girls</i>	<i>Class/students/team</i>
<i>Mother/Father</i>	<i>Parents</i>
<i>Guys</i>	<i>Everyone/Folks</i>
<i>Husband/Wife/Boyfriend/Girlfriend</i>	<i>Partner</i>

A discussion with secondary school students about their experience of primary school revealed what considerations should be taken when planning any KS1 and KS2 syllabus:

- “Do not assume students of student families gender or sexuality”
- “Give examples of different types of family structures”
- “Give people the space to be who they want to be”
- “Ergonomic seating within the classroom to help with fidgeting”
- Consequences for homophobia, transphobia and biphobia in schools

With regards to the curriculum itself, a number of opportunities in KS1 and KS2 Geography that can be explored with regards to social interactions and family units.

<i>Locational knowledge: name, locate and identify characteristics of the four countries and capital cities</i>	Same-sex families, gender as a spectrum, family life etc can be explored using
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<p><i>Place knowledge:</i> geographical similarities and differences through studying the human geography of a small area of the United Kingdom</p>	<p>simplified data about London and a chosen area from the UK census.</p> <p>Adaptation of the enquiry examples above.</p>
<p><i>Geog skills and fieldwork:</i> use simple fieldwork and observational skills to study ... key human features of the surrounding environment.</p>	<p>If a walk around the local area is practical, identifying any services useful for LGBTQ+ groups/individuals e.g youth groups.</p> <p>Mappings skills using the UK Census map</p>

### **Summary**

It is hoped that this article emphasises the importance of establishing safe spaces for LGBTQ+ young people and their peers. It highlights practical strategies for teachers to promote inclusivity and support, such as adjusting language usage and adapting curriculum content. By fostering environments where LGBTQ+ students can thrive without fear or prejudice, educators play a crucial role in enhancing their academic success and well-being. Through ongoing efforts to create inclusive classrooms, primary school teachers can contribute to a more equitable and supportive educational experience for all students.

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