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What are the lived experiences of young people who identify as part of a sexual minority in education settings in 2022? An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Glossary of Terms

LGBTQ+ - An acronym for lesbian, gay, transgender, queer/questioning. The plus represents other sexual and gender identities that are not covered by the first five initials.

Sexual Minority - A collective term for groups of people whose sexual identity may differ from the perceived societal “norm” of heterosexuality (APA, 2021).

Gay - Sexual or romantic attraction exclusively to one’s own sex or gender, most commonly used to refer to men.

Lesbian - Sexual or romantic attraction exclusively to one’s own sex or gender, most commonly used to refer to women.

Pansexual - A label that indicates sexual or romantic attraction to people regardless of their gender expression, gender identity, or biological sex.

Bisexual - Sexual or romantic attraction to more than one sex or gender.

Queer - An umbrella term for people to describe their sexual or romantic attraction in a range of ways that are not heterosexual.

Heterosexual - Sexual or romantic attraction to people of the opposite sex or gender.

Gender Identity - Used to refer to how an individual views and understands their own gender.

Intersex - An inclusive umbrella term to describe those who are born with natural variations in sex characteristics. These variations are different from a “typical” male or female body.

Non-binary - A term used to describe people whose identity exists outside of the gender binary (not solely male or female).

Transgender - Relating to a person whose gender identity does not correspond with their biological sex.

Cisgender - Relating to a person whose gender identity corresponds with their biological sex.

Abstract

Background

The ways in which gender and sexuality can be expressed has experienced rapid change and members of the LGBTQ+ community are becoming more visible. The number of young people openly identifying as part of the LGBTQ+ community is rising, with these young people often at risk of negative experiences in their education settings as a result of how they identify. Despite this changing context and given the impact of the recent COVID 19 pandemic, the research examining the educational experiences of sexually minoritised young people in England is limited. The purpose of the current research was to contribute to the understanding of the educational experiences of sexually minoritised young people and to provide a platform for these marginalised voices to be heard.

Methods

Four young people (aged 16-18 years old) who identify as part of a sexual minority were recruited and semi-structured interviews were carried out to discuss their experiences of education. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach was adopted.

Findings

Five Group Experiential Themes were identified following an analysis of the interviews. Participants discussed their *Journey to Discovering an Identity* and the support and barriers they faced during this process. They also outlined the importance of *Building a Supportive Community*. Participants then touched on *When Support from Your Education Setting Falls Short* and their *Reality of Belonging to a Sexual Minority in the Current Context*. Finally, the participants discussed the *Impact of Positive Support from Your Education Setting*.

Conclusions

The research findings highlighted that sexually minoritised young people seem to experience a range of difficulties and barriers, alongside some instances of positive support in their education settings. Findings are discussed in relation to previous literature in this area and relevant psychological theory. The implications for Educational Psychologists are discussed, with the findings indicating the importance of valuing the views of sexually minoritised young people, particularly when developing policies and guidelines for supporting these young people in their education settings.

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Chapter 1: Literature Review

1.1 Introduction

This study aimed to explore the educational experiences of young people (YP) who identify as part of a sexual minority. Exploration in this area is important due to limited recent research examining the lived experiences of sexually minoritised YP, particularly given the rapidly changing social and political landscape in England. The current study hoped to generate insight into the experiences of this population in order to build upon the foundations of previous research in this area.

This chapter will provide a review of the current literature related to the school experiences of YP who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community. It will introduce definitions relating to the LGBTQ+ acronym and will explore the experiences of those who identify within this umbrella. It will then examine the in-school support available for LGBTQ+ YP and the developments in such support. Next, the changing social and political landscape in England will be considered, focusing on recent changes to legislation and the curriculum and how these have impacted LGBTQ+ YP's educational experiences. Research around the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic on the wellbeing of LGBTQ+ YP will also be explored. This will be followed by the systematic element of the review which aimed to examine current literature around the educational experiences of LGBTQ+ YP, providing the context and rationale for the current research.

1.2 Conceptualisation of LGBTQ+

The visibility and expression of sexuality and gender identity has undergone significant social and cultural change. In particular, members of the LGBTQ+ community are more visible in many walks of life and the ways in which sexual and gender identity is expressed is more varied (Ayoub & Garretson, 2017). As a result, the umbrella term LGBTQ+ has evolved over the years to include a range of labels to describe gender identity and sexuality.

Until the 1980s, the term 'gay' was typically used to refer to all non-heterosexual people, resulting in the acronym GLBT. During the AIDS crisis, lesbians became the primary nurses and blood donors to the gay men, due to many healthcare workers refusing to treat AIDS patients (Faderman, 2015). This helped to build solidarity between gay men and lesbian women, resulting in a shift to the acronym LGBT (Faderman, 2015). The term 'queer' was adopted into the acronym following a shift in the 1990s amongst LGBTQ+ individuals to reclaim this word (Perlman, 2019). Rather than the label 'queer' referencing something odd or abnormal, some homosexual members of the community began to

adopt the label with pride. Since then, the term 'queer' has expanded, with some people using this as an umbrella term to describe themselves in a range of ways that are not heterosexual (Renn, 2010). The 'Q' has also expanded to include those who might be in the process of questioning their sexuality or gender identity (Faderman, 2015).

Therefore, the acronym LGBTQ+ embraces people who identify as lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual and queer/questioning. The "plus" represents the gender identities and sexualities that are not covered by the first five initials, such as pansexual and intersex (Davidson, 2020). This provides space for the community to continue to expand and evolve, allowing individuals to express themselves in ways that align with their true selves (Davidson, 2020). Whilst it can be useful to use the collective abbreviation LGBTQ+ to describe all members of this community, the broad diversity of people within this acronym must be considered and their needs distinguished (Jones & Hillier, 2013).

Studies have indicated that there is a danger of treating the LGBTQ+ acronym as monolithic, due to the misconception that the groups represented by this acronym are not distinct from one another (O'Sullivan & Phillips, 2019). Research demonstrates differences across subgroups of the LGBTQ+ community in a variety of health domains and demographic categories (Corliss et al., 2008; Eisenberg et al., 2019). When conducting research regarding the LGBTQ+ community, it is also vital to recognise that identities can intersect, making it difficult to discuss one subgroup in isolation from another. For example, those who identify as transgender, may also belong to a sexual minority. Within the National Transgender Discrimination Survey (Grant et al., 2011), 77% of the respondents reported their sexuality as something other than straight, with 48% being gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

It has been suggested to conceptualise such research involving the LGBTQ+ community as part of an intersectionality framework (Parent et al., 2013). This framework recognises the complex ways in which multiple social identities can intersect within systems of oppression and privilege in order to shape an individual's unique lived experiences (Eisenberg et al., 2019). For example, identifying as part of a subgroup of the LGBTQ+ community and experiencing discrimination as a result of this can emphasise social inequalities and have a profound impact on a person's wellbeing. Further to this, when somebody identifies as part of more than one subgroup of the LGBTQ+ community, this can create a complex multi-faceted identity structure. These multiple identities are likely to overlap and create a unique experience for this person (Parent et al., 2013). The following section will outline the range of identities that can be found within the LGBTQ+ acronym. These identities should be explored

with respect to the intersectionality framework and the understanding that a person may be part of more than one of these minority groups.

1.3 Identities within the LGBTQ+ Acronym

The LGBTQ+ community includes a wide range of individuals, including those who identify as gender diverse and sexually minoritised. Despite the overlap across these subgroups, the distinctiveness of each group should be recognised.

When exploring gender diversity, it is important to outline the discrepancy between biological sex and gender identity. The American Psychological Association (APA) (2015) outlines that at birth, individuals are assigned a biological sex based on their external genitalia and sex characteristics, such as chromosomes and hormones. In contrast to this, studies suggest that gender is a social construct that emerges through an individual's interactions with others. Within this construct, 'gender identity' is used to refer to how an individual views and understands their own gender. Traditionally, gender conforms to a binary model in which there is a social expectation that an individual's biological sex and gender identity are congruent (Burdge, 2007), also known as 'cisnormativity.'

The term 'transgender' is an umbrella term for individuals whose gender identity does not match their biological sex, whilst 'cisgender' refers to those who conform to a gender binary model (Cava, 2016; Connolly et al., 2016). Some individuals may adopt the terms, "non-binary", when a person's gender identity is neither exclusively man or woman, or "gender nonconforming", when an individual's gender identity falls outside of the traditional gender binary (Bower-Brown et al., 2021).

Research espouses that sexuality, or sexual identity, are terms that individuals may assign themselves based on their sexual attractions, desires, and relationships (Savin-Williams & Cohen, 1996). The identities within the umbrella of 'sexuality' can provide significance to the configuration of feelings and perceptions that an individual may experience around their sexual orientation and attractions. A collective term for groups of people whose sexual identity may differ from the perceived societal "norm" of heterosexuality, is "sexual minority." As outlined in the current APA 'Inclusive Language Guidelines' (2021), this refers to multiple sexual minority groups, including, but not limited to, those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or asexual.

According to Russel and Seif (2001), it is important to acknowledge that sexual minorities are not a homogenous group and there will be factors that differentially affect each sexual identity. There is

some contention over whether distinct categories, such as lesbian, gay, and bisexual, should be used to define sexuality (Clarke et al., 2010), or whether sexuality should be viewed as a spectrum.

Some believe that the use of categories is vital in providing members of a sexual minority with a voice to protect their rights, and to connect them to a larger community (Clarke et al., 2010). Others believe that these labels are an important instrument of regulation and normalisation (Butler, 1990). Some reject these labels, "in defiance of social identity labels which suggest the primacy of sexuality in their personal identities" (Cohler & Hammack, 2007, p.48). Others wish for sexuality to be viewed as fluid and have difficulty labelling themselves within these distinct categories (Diamond, 2005).

Additionally, the acronym LGBTQ+ extends to include the intersex community. The term intersex is adopted as an inclusive umbrella term to describe those who are born with natural variations in sex characteristics. These variations are different from a "typical" male or female body (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 2015). These sex differences can show great variation across individuals. They may have a genetic, chromosomal, or hormonal basis, and they may be visible at birth or only later in life (Jones et al., 2016). Despite a number of individuals born with these variations in sex characteristics choosing to identify as being 'intersex', others may prefer to use medical terms associated with their specific characteristics (Monro et al., 2017). One such medical term is 'Turner Syndrome'. This describes females who are born with one complete X chromosome rather than two X chromosomes (NHS, 2020). Whilst some intersex individuals may identify within the acronym LGBTQ+, others see this as problematic (Connor & Atkinson, 2022). It has been argued that intersex people will have unique experiences and needs which are distinct from others in the LGBTQ+ community (Monro et al., 2017).

Given the wide range of identities within the LGBTQ+ community and the varied ways these identities can be expressed. Alongside, acknowledgement of the intersectionality framework and the frequent overlap between these minority groups. It is important to explore the visibility of the LGBTQ+ community in the current social and cultural context.

1.4 The Visibility of the LGBTQ+ Community

Research indicates that global attitudes towards sexuality and gender expression have demonstrated rapid change (Ayoub & Garretson, 2017). According to Ayoub and Garretson (2017, p.2) a key factor behind this is the entry of "a younger, more socially liberal cohort into the public arena." Alongside

these changing attitudes, the prevalence of the LGBTQ+ community in the UK has increased (Office for National Statistics, 2020; Bowskill, 2017).

According to a survey by the Office for National Statistics (2020), in the UK an estimated 1.4 million people aged 16 and over identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) in 2019. This shows an increase from 1.2 million in 2018, contributing to this continuing trend. The survey identified that people in the age group 16-24 continue to show the highest percentage of those identifying as LGB, at 6.6% of all 16–24-year-olds, an increase from 4.4% in 2018 (Office for National Statistics, 2020).

Whilst there are no such official records reporting the number of transgender or gender non-conforming individuals in the UK, some estimate that around 1% of the UK population is transgender (Reed et al., 2009). Research suggests that the number of YP identifying as transgender is increasing (Bowskill, 2017). According to the Tavistock and Portman Clinic, the number of transgender YP referred for assessment in 2019-20 was 2,728. This number has shown an increase from 1,408 YP in 2015-16 (NHS, 2020).

Ayoub and Garretson (2017) highlighted global attitudes towards homosexuality are changing. They demonstrated a greater acceptance of homosexuality, with YP at the forefront of this change. They explored the explanations for this cross-cultural trend and their findings indicated that media pervasiveness and press freedom to express support for minority groups have influenced more liberal attitudes amongst YP. They suggested that the media allows YP to come into contact with minority groups that may have been less accessible to them previously. Therefore, whilst the current trends, as reported in this study, may not reflect an increase in the LGBTQ+ population, they may indicate that individuals, particularly YP, are more comfortable and able to openly identify as LGBTQ+ (Lewis & Gosset, 2008).

Despite the reported increased visibility and acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals, research has consistently outlined negative outcomes and experiences for those in the community (Kosciw et al., 2016; Seelman, 2014).

1.5 Experiences of LGBTQ+ Young People

1.5.1 Difficulties Faced by LGBTQ+ Young People

Studies have mapped the changing experiences of the LGBTQ+ community (White et al., 2018), particularly focusing on YP (Anderson & McCormack, 2016; Morris et al., 2014). Research has

revealed disparities in academic and health outcomes, particularly associated with negative school climates for LGBTQ+ YP compared to their non-LGBTQ+ peers (Kosciw et al. 2016; McGuire et al. 2010). A number of recent studies highlighted the challenges faced in school by LGBTQ+ pupils, with this marginalised group often not feeling protected or included in their education setting (Davidson, 2020; Madireddy & Madireddy, 2020).

In a study by Heck et al. (2013), LGBTQ+ pupils reported significantly more victimisation than their heterosexual peers. Further to this, results from the national Youth Risk Behaviour Surveillance survey conducted in the United States (US) revealed that 33% of sexual minority students had experienced bullying in school, compared to 17.1% of heterosexual students (Kann et al., 2018). In a recent study called The School Report (Bradlow et al., 2017), commissioned by Stonewall, a sample of 3,700 LGBT YP in secondary schools and colleges across Britain completed a survey on their educational experiences. Almost half of the participants (45%) reported being bullied due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. According to Day et al. (2018) existing research highlights hostile and unsafe school climates for LGBTQ+ YP. Schools can be classed as one of the “most homophobic of all social institutions” (Munoz-Plaza et al., 2002 p.53).

Homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia are terms used across studies to denote prejudice and bullying towards LGBTQ+ individuals (White et al., 2018). Homophobic and biphobic bullying consists of hostile behaviour towards another on the basis of perceived sexual orientation (Lemkin, 2012). Whilst transphobia implies discrimination against those whose gender expression doesn't conform to the traditional gender roles or binary (McGowan et al., 2022).

Research suggests that homophobic and transphobic bullying can predict significant psychological distress in LGBTQ+ youths (Poteat & Espelage, 2007). According to Poteat et al. (2011), studies have established an incremental negative impact of sexual identity-based bullying, which is beyond that of bullying in general, due to homophobic bullying being particularly threatening and severe. These experiences can be viewed as a potentially traumatic for these YP (deLara, 2019). Such discrimination is associated with a range of emotional and behavioural problems, lower levels of school belonging, and negative mental health outcomes (Day et al., 2018; Dilley, 2021).

Additionally, as LGBTQ+ students often experience heightened fear, anxiety, and isolation in school, they are more likely to demonstrate absenteeism and difficulties concentrating on learning (Flowers & Buston, 2001). According to Fisher et al. (2008), LGBTQ+ pupils are five times as likely as the general

population of students to report skipping school due to fear for their safety. Therefore, research has found that these pupils are at greater risk of academic difficulties (Arsenault, 2017). Alongside this, they are twice as likely to report no plans for post-secondary education (Fisher et al., 2008), thus impacting their long-term prospects (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Heteronormativity describes an assumption that heterosexuality is the normal mode of sexual orientation (Butler, 1990), and cisnormativity assumes that everyone will identify as the gender which they were assigned at birth (Worthen, 2016). Research has demonstrated implicit heteronormativity and cisnormativity in schools, alongside a lack of support networks and a negative school climate for LGBTQ+ youth (Savin-Williams, 2005). This includes a heteronormative curriculum which fails to cover and engage with sexually and gender diverse narratives and themes, often due to some staff feeling cautious and under-supported to cover these issues (Formby, 2013; White et al., 2018). According to The School Report (Bradlow et al., 2017), just one in five LGBT pupils in their survey had been taught about safe sex in relation to same-sex relationships. Such findings impact the sense of belonging of these YP, contributing to concerns around attending school.

As a result of these cumulative stressors, LGBTQ+ students are at increased risk of substance misuse, sexual and physical abuse and are at high risk of suicidal tendencies (Kosciw et al., 2016; Rhoades et al., 2018). According to The School Report (Bradlow et al., 2017), more than four in every five transgender YP who took part in their survey have self-harmed, alongside three in five LGB YP.

1.5.1.1 The Minority Stress Model

The minority stress model (Meyer, 2003) presents a framework to understand the disparity in school and academic outcomes between those in minority groups and those who are not in a minority group. The model recognises the unique and hostile stressors that minority populations face, with these stressors having a negative impact on their health outcomes. The model was originally theorised in the context of research examining the mental health of sexual minorities (Poteat et al., 2007).

This framework describes a process through which a combination of unique stressors that sexual minority members are faced with, can predispose this population to internalise more negative attitudes towards homosexuality (Meyer, 2003). These stressors can also contribute to an individual's expectation of rejection and their motivation to conceal their identity from others (Meyer, 2003). Additionally, minority stressors can translate into structural barriers for sexually minoritised YP's educational and vocational opportunities and their access to mental health services (Pearson &

Wilkinson, 2017). Higher levels of such internalised 'homonegativity' and the additional outcomes of minority stress, can lead to increased rates of mood and anxiety disorders, suicide ideation and substance abuse (Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Goldbach et al., 2014). Research has suggested that this model can also be applied to gender diverse individuals and the unique stressors that they may experience (Poteat et al., 2014).

It has been suggested that LGBTQ+ YP are at greater risk of harassment, victimisation and bullying at school due to their perceived gender expression or sexual identity (Stargell et al., 2020; Ratcliff et al., 2022). The minority stress model suggests that the health disparities between heterosexual, cisgender YP and members of the LGBTQ+ community, can be partially attributable to such cumulative stressors that these YP uniquely face (Ratcliff et al., 2022; Craig et al., 2018).

According to the intersectionality framework, YP who identify as part of more than one marginalised group within the LGBTQ+ community are likely to be at risk from different forms of discrimination (Parent et al., 2013). Their multiple identities will overlap, creating a unique experience for these individuals when coping with such oppression, compounding the effects of minority stress (Eisenberg et al., 2019).

When exploring the difficulties faced by LGBTQ+ YP, it is also important to recognise the positive aspects of their experiences. Such factors may help to support these YP to overcome such difficulties and to protect them from adversity.

1.5.2 Support and Protective Factors for LGBTQ+ Young People

The findings outlined in section 1.4.1 suggest that it is vital for schools to maintain safe and inclusive environments for LGBTQ+ YP, particularly as high school environments have been demonstrated to play a crucial role in influencing student wellbeing and overall health (Russell et al., 2016; Madireddy & Madireddy, 2020). Feeling safe and connected to the school environment can be key protective factors in buffering against the detrimental effects of bullying in LGBTQ+ youth (Espelage et al., 2008). Studies have indicated that such protective factors help lower the probability of suicide attempts and depression amongst these students (Galliher et al., 2004; Saewye et al., 2014).

According to Harris et al. (2021), supportive school-level initiatives can be crucial protective factors against the discrimination experienced by LGBTQ+ pupils. Further to this, a review of strategies for schools to prevent psychological stress, stigma, and suicidality risks among LGBTQ+ students found

that if these pupils are provided with the support they need and they feel valued in school, they are more able to reach their potential (Madireddy & Madireddy, 2020). Accomplishing this appears to involve ensuring schools focus on fostering positive academic, emotional, and social development for all students, whilst eliminating sexuality-based and gender-based discrimination.

Some of the strategies linked to positive school climates for LGBTQ+ pupils include implementing policies against bullying, having supportive school staff, and creating safe spaces for YP (Greytak et al., 2013). Such factors have been shown to protect against absenteeism and school dropouts as well as improving the school climate (Greytak et al., 2013; McGuire et al., 2010). Heck et al. (2013) carried out a retrospective study in the USA examining the benefits of attending a secondary school with a gay-straight alliance (GSA) for LGBT youth. GSAs are usually student-led, school-based clubs which aim to improve the school climate for LGBTQ+ youth and to educate on issues affecting this population (Davidson, 2020). Results from this study indicated that YP who attended a high school with a GSA reported significantly more favourable outcomes related to school experiences, alcohol use and psychological distress (Heck et al., 2013).

Furthermore, according to Singh et al. (2013), the availability of LGBTQ+ groups in schools can help to improve the self-advocacy skills of these YP. In these inclusive school environments, these YP are able to access opportunities for activism, creating positive change for other LGBTQ+ pupils as well as themselves. Alongside, such support groups, there have been changes to the legislation in place in schools and to the school curriculum, in order to help to improve the educational environment for LGBTQ+ YP.

1.6 The Changing Cultural Context in England

1.6.1 Changes to Legislation and Curriculum

There is consensus across the literature that cultural understanding and feelings towards sexual minorities and gender diversity in England are improving (Clements & Field, 2014). This is evident through changes to legislation and to the school curriculum in England, demonstrating more inclusive attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community.

There have been key legislative changes in England providing recognition for LGBTQ+ individuals. For example, The Gender Recognition Act (2004) provides legal recognition of the gender identity of transgender individuals. As a result of this legislation, transgender YP are issued a gender recognition

certificate once they turn 18, which means they are entitled to a birth certificate that matches their gender identity.

Following this, The Equality Act (2010) was instated. This defines gender reassignment and sexual orientation as protected characteristics. As such, these characteristics cannot be discriminated against. In line with this legislation, schools and children's services are required to demonstrate how they prevent discrimination and promote equality for LGBTQ+ YP.

The Department for Education (DfE, 2014) published advice for schools surrounding The Equality Act (2010). This states that schools need to ensure that pupils are not singled out for different and less favourable treatment based on their gender identity or sexual orientation. For transgender and gender questioning YP, this guidance outlines that school uniforms must not discriminate those who are undergoing gender reassignment and schools should demonstrate flexibility with their uniform policy (DfE, 2014).

In the English education system, studies have documented a liberalisation of attitudes towards LGBTQ+ YP (Weeks, 2008). The UK government have responded to such changes through curriculum developments and through establishing programmes that aim to enhance LGBTQ+ inclusion in schools in England. Following the changes to the statutory guidance regarding Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) introduced by the DfE (2019), from September 2020 it has been a legal requirement for every secondary school child in England to receive input around LGBT relationships. This guidance states that all secondary aged pupils should be taught about sexuality and gender identity and schools should ensure that all pupils feel that "the content is relevant to them and their developing sexuality" (DfE, 2019, pg. 26). It highlights the importance of teaching all YP about harmful stereotypes around gender and sexual orientation to prevent prejudice.

The new Ofsted Education Inspection Framework (2019) also outlines the importance of protecting YP from prejudicial behaviour, including homophobic, biphobia and transphobic bullying. Schools must provide records of such incidents. Additionally, inspectors will examine how schools approach the promotion of equality and inclusivity in the school environment, ensuring that individuality is valued and that the school setting meets the needs of all pupils.

The statutory guidance for schools and colleges around 'Keeping children safe in education' (DfE, 2022) was introduced in September 2022. Education settings must have regard for this guidance when carrying out their duties relating to the safeguarding and promoting the welfare of YP. This

highlights the importance of the implementation and awareness of appropriate policies and procedures which support the safeguarding of YP. In particular, a behaviour policy which includes measures to prevent bullying, including prejudice-based bullying.

The statutory guidance outlines the crucial role of schools and colleges in preventative education, creating a culture of zero-tolerance for homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia. As a group at risk of additional harm, LGBT children and YP are included within this guidance. It outlines that LGBT YP should have access to a safe space in their setting and a trusted member of staff with whom they can share their concerns.

Despite these positive changes across education for LGBTQ+ YP in England recently, it should be noted that these YP continue to face many obstacles, impacting their wellbeing.

1.6.2 The Impact of the COVID 19 Pandemic

When COVID 19 was declared a pandemic by the UK government, social distancing restrictions were introduced to reduce the spread of the virus. Enforced lockdown periods resulted in school closures and education disruptions for YP across the world, with lessons occurring remotely and YP being separated from their friends (McKinlay et al., 2022). A range of studies have reported how adolescents and YP have been affected by the quarantine measures, particularly their well-being, mental health, and social life (Winter & Lavis, 2022).

A survey of 2,934 LGBTQ+ YP aged 11-18 years old was conducted by Just Like Us (2021) to explore their experiences. This highlighted the negative impact of the COVID 19 lockdown periods on LGBTQ+ YP. According to this survey, 90% of the LGBT YP that took part in the research said that their mental health had been impacted by lockdown. The survey indicated that 68% of LGBTQ+ YP who took part had experienced worse mental health during the pandemic. Furthermore, 14% of the LGBTQ+ participants had attempted suicide in the past year.

A significant factor contributing towards the difficulties faced by LGBTQ+ YP during lockdown was reported to be their lack of access to their in-school support networks. During the lockdowns, 52% of the YP who took part in the survey felt lonely and separated from their peers. 17% of these YP felt less able to express their sexual or gender identity during lockdown, perhaps due to less acceptance at home.

The following section will review the research discussed so far and will examine potential gaps in this area of research, thus providing the rationale for the current study.

1.7 Rationale for the Current Research

1.7.1 Gaps in the Literature

Based on scoping searches of the current literature in this area by the researcher, there is a small body of research examining the experiences of LGBTQ+ pupils in schools in the US, and the positive impact of additional support. However, there seems to be an absence of UK studies investigating the experiences of LGBTQ+ YP. Studies in this area seem to be focused on schools in the US, particularly examining the impact of GSAs in creative positive school environments. For example, Dilley (2021) conducted a US study examining the impact of school climate on the wellbeing of LGBTQ+ students. Participants in this study scored significantly higher on a measure of psychological wellbeing as a result of increased support in college, compared to the support they received in high school. Similarly, Lo (2019) examined protective factors in US schools for LGBTQ+ students. It was found that the presence of GSA or similar student-led clubs, an inclusive curriculum, supportive school personnel, and appropriate anti-bullying policies acted as protective factors for these pupils and contributed to a more positive school climate. For the current study, it would be beneficial to examine the experiences of LGBTQ+ YP in education settings in England.

There is a growing quantity of research examining the experiences of transgender and gender questioning youth in schools. A study by Day et al. (2018) investigated the experiences of transgender youths in school and their perceptions of the school climate. They found that transgender YP were more likely to report more negative perceptions of school climate. Leonard (2020) explored the positive school experiences of transgender YP. This study highlighted the positive practice in place in some schools and how these settings are helping to promote inclusivity.

Despite this, there appears to be limited research focusing on the educational experiences of pupils in sexual minorities in UK schools; with 'sexual minorities' referring to multiple sexual orientations, including those who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (APA, 2020).

1.7.2 The Role of the Educational Psychologist

Within the literature surrounding support for LGBTQ+ YP, there is little research regarding the role of the Educational Psychologist (EP) (Lemkin, 2012). It has been suggested that EPs may lack

understanding of issues surrounding sexual orientation and gender diversity (Bowskill, 2017). Due to an increased number of YP identifying within this umbrella, it is felt to be important for EPs to be involved in supporting LGBTQ+ pupils (Monsen & Bayley, 2007).

Following the Children and Families Act (DfE, 2014) and the extension of the role of EPs to cover the age range from birth to 25 years, EPs have a key role in supporting post-16 YP as they prepare for adulthood (Atkinson et al., 2015). The Preparing for Adulthood Agenda arose following these SEND reforms and focuses on four areas to promote a successful adult life for YP, these include: employment; independent living; friend, relationships and community; and good health (Preparing for Adulthood, 2013). These outcomes are significant for LGBTQ+ YP, particularly in relation to promoting a sense of belonging within their school community and promoting good health within this group, including their mental health and wellbeing.

EPs are well-placed to support the wellbeing of these YP and to promote inclusive practice within educational settings through raising awareness, challenging attitudes, and initiating discussions around how schools can best support the needs of LGBTQ+ YP (Lemkin, 2012).

It appears that there is a need for research based in England that can inform the work of EPs with YP who identify as part of a sexual minority, highlighting practice that may be helpful to support these pupils and to promote their wellbeing.

1.7.3 Conclusion

Given the significant influence of identity on school wellbeing and outcomes, and the positive influence of protective factors in school, it seems important to explore the support available for these YP in school. Research acknowledges the importance of exploring the views of transgender YP to support their journey through school; however less focus is given to those who identify within the wider LGBTQ+ community. Thus, the support for these YP is potentially underrepresented in the literature. Whilst research suggests that there are positive changes in place and the social and political landscape is shifting, the extent to which LGBTQ+ YP are benefitting from these changes is unclear. This raises the question as to whether these experiences are unknown, or whether there is little to be reported.

Given the rapidly changing social and political landscape in England, particularly relating to the RSE curriculum and statutory guidance around equality and discrimination prevention in schools, it

appears important to contribute to an increased understanding of the experiences of sexually minoritised YP within this context. More recently, there has been little exploration of the COVID 19 pandemic and the impact this may have had on the experiences of sexually minoritised YP.

Considering the findings of the review so far, it is of interest to investigate and evaluate existing studies conducted in England examining the experiences of LGBTQ+ YP as a whole. In the following section, a systematic literature review is conducted to explore what is known currently about the experiences of LGBTQ+ YP, to determine the views presented already and how further research could contribute to the existing literature.

Chapter 2: Systematic Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a systematic literature review to explore the existing research findings regarding the experiences of LGBTQ+ YP in education. Systematic reviews are carried out to explore the current evidence base related to a specific research question. They involve a process of rigorously searching for relevant literature, critically appraising each study, and synthesising these studies (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). A synthesis can provide an understanding of a range of research in the research area, pulling together qualitative studies on the topic of interest and examining their findings. Therefore, a systematic review can provide a more comprehensive insight into current understanding of a phenomenon compared to any single study alone, thus highlighting any gaps in the research for future exploration (Evans et al., 2004).

The aim of this systematic review was to present an overview of the evidence around the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ YP in education. This section will begin with an exploration of the method used for the current systematic review, and why this is relevant for the research topic. It will then examine the aim of the review, including justification for the inclusion studies focusing of the wider LGBTQ+ community within the review. An inclusion and exclusion criteria will be outlined, alongside the search terms used across the databases. The evidence base will be appraised, considering the strengths of each study. The researcher will then examine the themes present across these studies and perform a reciprocal translation. The themes will be synthesised and disseminated. This section will include an exploration of what is known about the current research area and a rationale for the current empirical study.

2.2 Method of the Current Systematic Review

This section will outline the methodology the researcher adopted to carry out this review, alongside the aims and the chosen research questions.

The current review sought to gain insight into the experiences of LGBTQ+ YP, therefore a qualitative approach was taken to generate a rich understanding of these educational experiences. A range of approaches to qualitative evidence synthesis exist, all of which aim to draw together findings across qualitative studies (Petticrew & Robert, 2006). According to Jones (2004), qualitative systematic reviews are best approached with qualitative methods, rather than attempting to adapt quantitative review methods or systems which can cause much of the nuance of qualitative data to get lost.

The key forms of qualitative synthesis outlined in the literature include critical interpretative syntheses, meta-ethnographies, realist syntheses, meta narrative reviews and grounded theory approaches (Gough et al., 2012). These methods allow for the findings of qualitative studies to be aggregated, integrated and/or interpreted (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2002). According to Gough et al. (2012), there is a great deal of overlap between these approaches and a lack of consensus on the methods of each.

The researcher initially considered adopting a descriptive approach on the continuum of qualitative syntheses. It was felt that such methods could allow for a focus on the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ YP. These approaches help to summarise the collective conclusions of the included studies; however, this does not allow the researcher to engage in secondary data analysis and interpretation (Bearman & Dawson, 2013). Due to the focus of the topic of the current review, it was felt that a layer of interpretation would be important in order to develop new insights in an underexplored area of research.

A thematic synthesis is an approach to qualitative synthesis which involves describing the findings of each study and qualitatively analysing this data through thematic analysis (Bearman & Dawson, 2013). Whilst this method allows for interpretation of the current research and how this contributes to our further understanding, there is less focus on the individual lived experiences and how meaning is made by the participants.

Therefore, it was felt that a meta-ethnographic approach would be most appropriate for the current systematic review based on the aims and phenomenological nature of the empirical study. A meta-ethnographic approach is based on the theory that a more useful way to understand studies is to create an analogy amongst them (Noblit & Hare, 1988). This approach, as outlined by Noblit and Hare (1988), involves re-analysing and re-interpreting the findings of existing studies of interest, and interpreting these findings based on the context of the individual studies. This rigorous process of synthesis can provide new interpretations that go beyond the findings of any individual study, whilst preserving the individual experiences of the participants in the research (Savin-Baden & Major, 2010). This review method allows the researcher to view the current field of research in their area of interest prior to investigating this further, paying close attention the knowledge that has already been generated. As a result, a meta-ethnographic approach was adopted by the current review to explore the current literature on the experiences of LGBTQ+ YP.

2.2.1 Process of the Meta-ethnography

Noblit and Hare (1988) proposed seven phases of a meta-ethnography. The current review examined each of these phases in relation to the experiences of LGBTQ+ YP. These stages are outlined in the sequence described by Noblit and Hare (1988) in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1

The stages of a Meta-ethnography (Noblit & Hare, 1988).

Stage of the Meta-ethnography	Description
1. Getting started	The researcher outlines their area of interest and the focus of the synthesis.
2. Deciding what is relevant to the initial interest	The process of identifying and selecting qualitative studies to include in the synthesis. This involves setting up the parameters for material chosen for the meta-ethnography.
3. Reading the studies	Repeatedly reading the studies and noting down any findings, including metaphors, concepts, and themes. Metaphors and concepts include any explanatory ideas. Themes include patterns across datasets that are important to the research question.
4. Determining how the studies are related	From the list of findings created, including the key metaphors, phrases, ideas and concepts and their relations for each study, the researcher juxtaposes these findings. This phase explores the similarities and differences between the studies.
5. Translating the studies into one another	Translations involve systematically comparing the meaning of the findings across the different studies, considering their contexts.
6. Synthesising the translations	If any common or translated concepts arise from phase five, these can be compared to one another to explore whether some concepts can encompass those from other studies. This can allow the researcher to access new interpretations and understandings of the data.
7. Expressing the synthesis	This phase involves tailoring the findings of the synthesis to a wider audience.

2.2.2 Aims and Research Question

This section links to phase one of Noblit and Hare’s (1988) phases of conducting a meta-ethnography. According to Petticrew and Roberts (2006), a systematic review can be useful when questions still remain about peoples’ experiences. Analysis can be helpful in refining current research questions. The current empirical study aimed to examine the experiences of sexually minoritised YP in education

settings. An initial scope of current literature in this area revealed limited research conducted in England focusing on sexuality alone, therefore the researcher decided to explore both sexuality and gender in this systematic review. It was felt that identifying research that has focused on the views and school experiences of YP who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community as a whole would provide sufficient data for the systematic review. Additionally, the researcher felt that such data would support the focus of the current research through highlighting the experiences of LGBTQ+ YP in England and any gaps in the literature in this area.

The following question informed the systematic search:

What are the educational experiences of LGBTQ+ young people in England?

2.2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

When conducting a qualitative research synthesis, it is important to have a systematic search strategy criteria (Savin-Baden & Major, 2010). Therefore, the first step in the systematic review process was to define these criteria and justify each choice (Table 2.2). This links to phase 2 of Noblit and Hare’s (1988) phases of conducting a meta-ethnography.

Table 2.2

Inclusion and exclusion criteria for the current systematic review.

	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Participants	YP of secondary school or college age who identify as LGBTQ+ YP currently attending a mainstream education setting	Studies that only include parent, teacher, other professional views YP not attending an education setting.
Methodological Focus	Exploring the views and educational experiences of LGBTQ+ pupils.	Studies that exclusively focus on professionals’ experiences/perceptions. Studies not focussing on views of educational experiences.
Study design	Qualitative or mixed methods research.	Exclusively quantitative methodology.

Type of publication	Peer reviewed and grey literature, including unpublished theses.	Other publications (e.g., books or reviews of books)
Date of publication	Published in or after 2012	Published prior to 2012
Location	Study conducted in England	Study conducted outside of England
Language	English	Not available in English

2.2.3.1 Rationale for the Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Participants

For this review, the views and experiences of YP who identify as belonging to the LGBTQ+ community were sought. In this context, LGBTQ+ refers to YP who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning. The plus represents other sexual or gender identities.

Due to the purpose of the current study to examine the educational experiences of these YP, it was important for them to be attending, or recently having attended, an education setting, such as school or college.

Methodological Focus

The purpose of this review was to explore the experiences of LGBTQ+ YP, therefore studies were excluded which solely outlined the views of those other than LGBTQ+ YP, or those that made it difficult to distinguish the views of these YP specifically.

Study Design

Due to the focus of the current review being on the experiences of YP, only qualitative or mixed methods research designs were included.

Type of Publication

Peer-reviewed journals were included to maintain research rigour and validity. Due to limited research in this area, grey literature was also included, providing rich data to explore. Grey literature is used to describe a range of literature disseminated outside of peer-reviewed journals.

Date of Publication

The purpose of the current research was to explore the experiences of LGBTQ+ YP in the current context due to the rapidly changing social and political landscape in England. Therefore, this review included studies conducted in the last 10 years, ensuring a contemporary focus.

Location

There is variation in practice in education settings across the nations in the UK. Therefore, the current review focused on examining the educational experiences of YP in England and only studies conducted in England were included within the review.

Language

Included articles needed to be written in English to ensure the researcher could access their content.

2.2.4 Search Strategy

Studies were identified through systematic searches of the following well-established databases: 'Web of Science', 'PsycINFO (Ovid)' and 'ERIC (EBSCO)'. Grey literature was obtained through ETHOS (<https://ethos.bl.uk/>). The search was conducted in July 2022.

Due to the variation of terminology used, particularly in relation to the acronym 'LGBTQ+', multiple search terms were adopted across these databases. The following search string was used in the systematic search:

((“Experience*” OR “view*” OR “perception*”) AND (“Young people*” OR “pupil*”) AND (“School*” OR “Education”) AND (LGBT* OR Trans* OR Gay* OR Lesbian* OR Queer* OR Questioning OR Bi OR Bisexual* OR Non-Binary OR sexual orientation OR gender identity))

2.2.5 Studies Identified

Electronic searches identified 537 studies. 7 further studies were hand-picked from the grey literature, based on their titles and apparent relevance to the current research question. In total, following these searches, 544 studies were found.

Initial search results are illustrated in Table 2.3 below.

Table 2.3

Table to display the results for search terms across the selected databases.

Database	Total Search Results
Web of Science	354
PsycINFO (OVID)	139
ERIC (EBSCO)	44
ETHOS	7
Total	544

After the removal of duplicates, 499 remained. Following a review of the titles and abstracts against the eligibility criteria, 13 studies remained. 6 studies were then excluded at the full-text screening, the reasons for the exclusion of these papers are outlined in Appendix A. This left a total of 7 studies in the review (See Table 2.4)

A flow diagram depicting the whole search process can be found in Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1

Flow diagram depicting the systematic search process and outcomes.

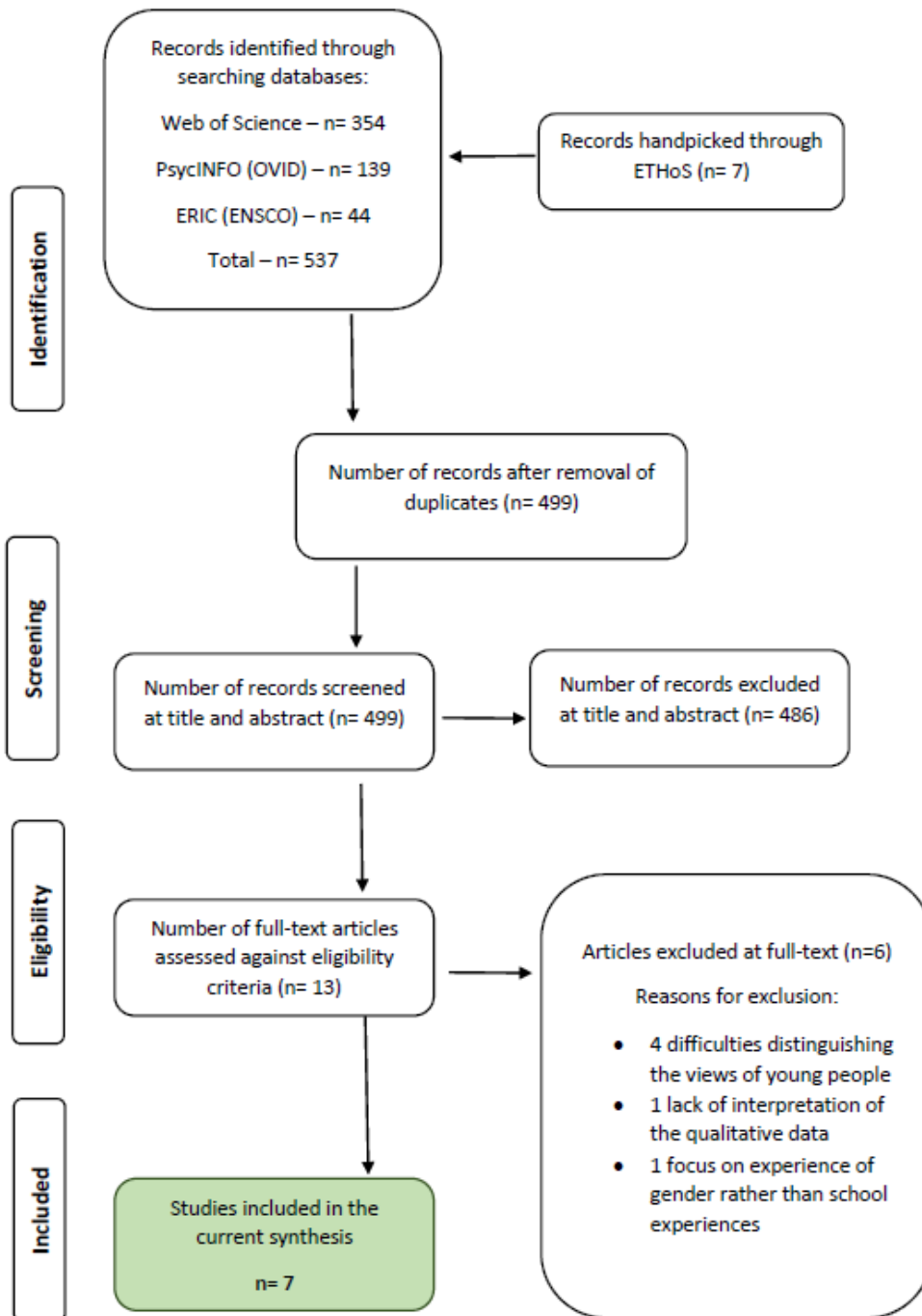


Table 2.4

Study characteristics of the final studies to be synthesised.

Source Paper (n=7)	Sample (age and how they identify)	Type of study	Method of data collection	Aim of study	Key findings
An exploratory study of the retrospective educational experiences of young intersex adults. (Connor & Atkinson, 2022)	2 participants. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aged 31, identifies female (GAAB), intersex Aged 22, identifies female (GAAB), intersex variation 	Peer reviewed	Empirical study involving 2 semi-structured interviews	To understand the retrospective lived educational experiences of 2 intersex adults and explore their views of improving educational practice around intersex issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identified themes representing the retrospective experiences of intersex adults, with a key theme highlighted as ‘knowledge and understanding’. Participants identified a lack of awareness of intersex and limited information sharing, resulting in lack of inclusivity. Protective factors, such as support groups and counselling services, helped support the journey of acceptance. Explored best practice in education for intersex YP, including increased knowledge and awareness through broader curriculum and staff training. Highlighted importance of equality and diversity in educational settings.
Binary-trans, non-binary and gender-questioning adolescents experiences in UK schools. (Bower-Brown,	25 binary-trans YP, aged 13-17 25 non-binary YP, aged 13-17 24 gender questioning	Peer reviewed	Large mixed-methods survey of LGBTQ+ YP’s social experiences. Open-ended responses selected for	To explore the school experiences of gender diverse YP and the ‘navigation strategies’ used by these YP in the school environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gender diverse YP experience discrimination in school through normativity and pressure to exist within a gender binary. Lack of societal understanding and acceptance. Including minimal access to safe ‘spaces’ (e.g., toilets, changing rooms) and lack of teacher support.

Zadeh & Jadva, 2020)	young people, aged 13-17		qualitative thematic analysis		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Navigation strategies involve ‘disclosure negotiation’ and control over how you identify. YP protect themselves from negative narratives through presenting differently at home and amongst friends and at school. • Gender diverse YP highlighted the value of seeking out allies and creating communities through friendships with LGBTQ+ peers.
The experiences of transgender young people and their parents: Informing the work of Educational Psychologists. (Freedman, 2019)	4 YP. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trans male, aged 15 • Trans male, aged 13 • Trans male, aged 15 • Trans male, aged 15 	Thesis	4 semi-structured interviews	To explore the experiences of transgender YP (and their parents) in relation to home, community, and school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • YP explored the complexities of gender and the factors surrounding acceptance of identity. • Complexities of transitioning and fear around not being accepted. • YP explored their school experiences and highlighted that there have been more negative experiences, especially due to lack of knowledge and understanding. • Support networks identified as a key support for these YP, however further understanding around being transgender is needed.
‘It was probably one of the best moments of being trans*, honestly!’: Exploring the positive school experiences of transgender children and	3 YP. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transman, aged 18 • Transwoman, aged 18 • Transman, aged 16 	Peer reviewed	3 semi-structured interviews	To explore and highlight some of the positive school experiences of transgender youth to promote positive change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • YP highlight the importance of language, making them feel respected and accepted. • Value of individual teacher support and whole school approaches, increasing awareness and understanding. • The importance of community, in relation to supportive peers and families, alongside trans role models. • YP spoke about their self-advocacy and their experiences of facilitating positive change for others through this empowerment.

young people.
(Leonard, 2022)

<p>Living your truth: Views and experiences of transgender young people in secondary education. (McGowan, Wright & Sargeant, 2022)</p>	<p>10 transgender YP aged 13-16 (M=15)</p>	<p>Peer reviewed</p>	<p>10 semi-structured interviews</p>	<p>To explore the views and experiences of transgender pupils attending secondary schools in the UK, focussing on factors that support or hinder positive school experiences.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overarching theme around ‘acceptance and validation’ of gender identity. • YP highlighted the process of seeking acceptance and validation of their identity, including wanting more education around trans issues in school. • They indicated the value of support from key staff members in school, providing autonomy over coming out and feeling safe at school. • A further theme recognised the active rejection and invalidation that these YP experience. • Some YP also highlighted experiences of passive rejection and invalidation through the heteronormative school cultures and gendered school systems and facilities. This impacts mental health and school attendance for trans YP.
<p>The changing experiences of bisexual male adolescents (Morris, McCormack & Anderson, 2014)</p>	<p>15 openly bisexual males aged 16-18 years</p>	<p>Peer reviewed</p>	<p>15 semi-structured interviews</p>	<p>To understand the influence of the decline in homophobia on the lived experiences of bisexual male adolescents</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The participants highlighted positive changes in their experiences, recognising the importance of acceptance from friends and family as protective factors. • The importance of inclusive education settings was emphasised, including support from staff allowing for them to be open about their identity in school.

					<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some YP indicated the use of support groups in school to help raise awareness and encourage diversity. • Some YP highlighted the negative experiences of school, particularly bullying and lack of understanding.
<p>Non-binary young people and schools: Pedagogical insights from a small-scale interview study. (Paechter, Toft & Carlile, 2021)</p>	<p>8 non-binary teenagers aged 13-18 years</p>	<p>Peer reviewed</p>	<p>8 semi-structured interviews</p>	<p>To illuminate the experiences of non-binary YP in UK schools</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The YP in the study outlined the importance having the resources to explore their identity. • Negative experiences at school were highlighted, particularly though teacher ignorance and lack of understanding. • The YP explained experiences of bullying, making them fearful to come out at school. Some YP suggested feeling invisible when teachers don't intervene. • School policies were explored, with YP highlighting these as not specific to non-binary people. They indicated that policies in school are often gendered. • Education about non-binary identities was outlined as vital in helping these YP feel seen in school.

2.2.6 Characteristics of the Included Studies

According to Noblit and Hare (1988), phase 3 of a meta-ethnography involves reading through the final studies to familiarise and begin the process of determining similarities between the findings. Metaphors, concepts and themes were extracted from the findings sections and the discussions of the studies as these sections were of most relevance when answering the research question. This data was tabulated using the headings: participant sample; study type; methodology; study aims; and key findings (Table 2.4). One study included views from both YP and parents, in this case only data relating to the experiences of YP has been reported (Freedman, 2019).

The researcher then moved on to phase 4 of the meta-ethnography. Using the lists of key metaphors, phrases, ideas and concepts create during phase 3, the researcher juxtaposed these as part of the development of the meta-analysis. See Appendix E for an example of the process adopted to complete phase 4.

It was important to consider the contexts of each study prior to translation and synthesis (Noblit & Hare, 1988). Out of the final seven papers included in the review, five studies carried out interviews with gender diverse YP, including those who identify as transgender, non-binary or gender-questioning (Bower-Brown et al., 2020; Freedman, 2019; Leonard, 2022; McGowan et al., 2022; Paechter et al., 2021). One study carried out research with young intersex adults (Connor & Atkinson, 2022) and one explored the experiences of bisexual male adolescents (Morris et al., 2014). Six of the studies were peer reviewed (Bower-Brown et al., 2020; Connor & Atkinson, 2022; Leonard, 2022; McGowan et al., 2022; Morris et al., 2014; Paechter et al., 2021) and one was an unpublished doctoral thesis (Freedman, 2019). One study carried out retrospective semi-structured interviews with their participants (Connor & Atkinsons, 2022) and one involved a survey of LGBTQ+ YP's social experiences, with open-ended responses being selected for analysis (Bower-Brown et al., 2020). The remaining five studies all used semi-structured interviews as their method of data collection (Freedman, 2019; Leonard, 2022; McGowan et al., 2022; Morris et al., 2014; Paechter et al., 2021).

2.2.7 Appraisal of the Included Studies

The studies were then assessed for their quality. There are many tools which can be used to critically appraise quantitative research. Studies can be viewed hierarchically and assessed in comparison to a 'gold standard' of research. However, there is some uncertainty across the literature regarding critical appraisal of qualitative research (Barbour, 2001). Due to the subjective insights outlined in

qualitative studies, the tools used for quantitative quality appraisal are not appropriate. As a result, there is no single preferred method for quality appraisal of qualitative studies (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006).

The Weight of Evidence framework (Gough, 2007) was applied to critically appraise each study individually, considering their quality. This incorporates three areas which are considered when assessing the weight to give the evidence of each study.

Weight of Evidence A involves assessing the study's coherence and trustworthiness. This assessment is completed in relation to quality criteria. For the current review, The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme for Qualitative Research Checklist (CASP, 2018) was used to examine the quality of the included studies and inform Weight of Evidence A. The CASP is designed specifically to enable the evaluation of qualitative research and has been used in other meta-ethnography studies for quality appraisal (Rushbrooke et al., 2014; Whittle & Butler, 2018). A more detailed guide on the use of the CASP can be found in Appendix B. Each paper received a score on a scale of 0-3 depending on the amount of information provided under each category, outcomes can be found in Appendix C.

Weight of Evidence B reviews the relevance of the form of evidence in relation to answering the proposed research question (Gough, 2007). The research question for the current review was focused on the experiences of LGBTQ+ YP and their experiences in education. Therefore, studies that employed data collection methods including open-ended questions allowing for participants to express their experiences freely were given a higher weight of evidence. Studies using analysis methods that were inductive and focusing primarily on participant experiences and perspectives to inform the results, rather than theory, were given a higher rating.

Weight of Evidence C is a review specific judgment regarding the relevance of the focus of the study to the research question (Gough, 2007). This includes aspects such as the participant sample, the type of evidence and the analysis methods used. The current review focused on LGBTQ+ YP's experiences in education settings. Therefore, studies that focused solely on LGBTQ+ YP's views were given a higher weight than those that also focused on the views of teachers and parents. This review also aimed to examine the experiences of these YP in England, so studies including participants from other areas of the UK were given a lower weight.

Weight of Evidence D combines these three judgements and provides an overall assessment of the extent to which the study contributes evidence to answering the research question (Gough, 2007).

2.2.7.1 Weight of Evidence

Appendix D shows the weight of evidence assessments for each individual study included in the review. The seven studies were given a weight of evidence from low to high, based on their Weight of Evidence D (Table 2.5).

Table 2.5

Scores from the Weight of Evidence quality assessment.

Study	WoE A	WoE B	WoE C	WoE D
Connor and Atkinson (2022)	High	High	Medium	High
Bower-Brown et al. (2020)	Medium-High	Medium-High	High	Medium-High
Freedman (2019)	High	High	Medium	Medium-High
Leonard (2022)	High	High	High	High
McGowan et al. (2022)	Medium-High	High	High	High
Morris et al. (2014)	Medium-High	High	Medium	Medium-High
Paechter et al. (2021)	High	Medium	High	Medium-High

2.2.7.2 Weight of Evidence Across the Studies

All seven of the studies included in the current review were given a medium-high or high weight of evidence rating. This process outlined some strengths and limitations across the studies.

The three studies receiving the highest quality judgement were Connor and Atkinson (2022), Leonard (2022) and McGowan et al. (2022). Each of these studies clearly outlined their approaches to participant recruitment, data collection and analysis. They also utilised semi-structured interviews, including open ended questions, allowing for a rich exploration of participant experiences. This data was analysed through inductive approaches. The highest rated studies also solely included LGBTQ+ YP, providing rich detail on their experiences.

Bower-Brown et al. (2020) received a medium-high rating. This was due to limitations around the data collection technique. They used a large-scale survey from which the researchers only analysed the open-ended questions. There was also limited consideration of the relationship between the

researcher and participants within the study. Freedman (2019) also received a medium-high rating as their study contained the voices of the parents of LGBTQ+ YP. Finally, Morris et al. (2014) received a medium-high rating as two of their participants were from Wales or Scotland, and their educational experiences could have been impacted by differences in education systems.

2.2.8 Translation and Synthesis of the Studies

The next section of the review involves a translation of the studies and a synthesis of this translation (Noblit & Hare, 1988). When translating the studies, the researcher determines whether there are similarities or differences within and between them. The metaphors, concepts, and themes within one account are maintained in relation to those in the same account, and across different studies, considering the context of the pieces of research (Noblit & Hare, 1988). This translation most often takes three different forms:

1. Reciprocal Translation occurs when the studies are complimentary, and the researcher attempts to explore how best to express this. This “requires the assumption that the studies can be ‘added’ together. That is, they are clearly studies about some similar things” (Noblit & Hare, 1988, p.40).
2. Refutational Translation most often occurs when studies contradict each other. Therefore, the goal of such translation is to understand what holds the studies together and what sets them apart.
3. A Line of Argument Synthesis is conducted when there are aspects of commonality between the studies, alongside differences. Typically, a translation is conducted prior to performing a line of argument synthesis (Noblit & Hare, 1988).

For the current review, the researcher examined the studies and explored their similarities and differences, whilst keeping in mind the context of each study. The main metaphors, concepts and themes were viewed in relation to others within the same study and with those across other studies. The researcher decided that a reciprocal translation would be most appropriate given the complimentary nature of the themes across the studies. During this reciprocal translation, these themes were mapped across the studies to determine key initial themes present amongst all of the studies. From this process, ten key initial themes emerged (See Table 2.6).

The researcher then synthesised these translations (Noblit & Hare, 1988). Therefore, the translations can be viewed as one level of a synthesis. If there are varied studies within the synthesis, and many translations, these can be compared further to contribute to a second level of synthesis. As a result, when the studies are placed together, compared and contrasted, the understanding phenomenon in question can be expanded. This can create new interpretations and insights into the research area that might not have been present through a single study alone (Noblit & Hare, 1988).

Therefore, for the current review, the initial themes generated following a reciprocal translation were synthesised into third-order interpretations to represent the views and interpretations of the final synthesis which go beyond the interpretations contained within the original studies. When reading through the second-order translations, additional ideas were noted and compared across the papers. This led to the generation of five third-order interpretations, outlined in Table 2.6 (See Appendix E to view the themes identified in individual papers, along with how these translate into the second-order and third-order interpretations).

Table 2.6

Table to show the third-order interpretations developed from the initial themes across the studies.

Initial Theme/Second-order construct	Third-order interpretation
Exploration and formation of identity Navigating ‘coming out’	Journey to understanding and acceptance
Individual support and acceptance Whole-school approaches to support	Protective factors in school
Proactive protection and vigilance Concealment	Advocating for yourself
Hostility and bullying Feeling invisible	Active discrimination
Normativity and stereotypes School policies and procedures	Passive discrimination and invalidation

2.3 Expressing the Synthesis

In phase 7 of conducting a meta-ethnography, Noblit and Hare (1988) highlight the importance of tailoring the findings of the meta-ethnography to the audience to make the new interpretations clear. Therefore, this part of the review will explore the third-order interpretations at the beginning of each

section to outline these new interpretations and how they relate to each second-order interpretation. The key initial themes or second-order interpretations generated across the studies which relate to these will then be discussed individually, with respect to the initial studies and their contexts.

Third-order interpretation 1 – Journey to understanding and acceptance

The themes ‘Exploration and formation of identity’ and ‘Navigating ‘coming out’’ contributed to the third-order interpretation ‘Journey to understanding and acceptance’. The data suggests that YP in the LGBTQ+ community can experience complex journeys to understanding of their identity. For gender diverse YP, it seems that a key challenge is the complexity of gender and the presence of social constructs making it difficult to explore gender diversity (Freedman, 2019; McGowan et al., 2022; Paechter et al., 2021). Studies highlighted that this is not a lone journey and YP draw on support from others who may have been through similar experiences. A pivotal part of this journey seems to be coming out to others. It seems that changes in societal understanding of the LGBTQ+ community has led to greater acceptance for some (Freedman, 2019; Morris et al., 2014), however some YP still experience barriers along this journey (Freedman, 2019; Bower-Brown et al., 2020; Connor & Atkinson, 2022; McGowan et al., 2022). This third-order interpretation suggests that a key aspect of the school experience for LGBTQ+ YP is this process of exploring and discovering their identity.

Theme 1 – Exploration and formation of identity

This theme was evident across four studies (Connor & Atkinson, 2022; Freedman, 2019; McGowan et al., 2022; Paechter et al., 2021). Connor and Atkinson (2022) outlined the ‘journey of identity acceptance’ for young intersex adults. Participants in Freedman’s (2019) research highlighted the complexity of gender and the challenges of finding an identity within this social construct. Three YP in this study explained their experiences with discovering their identity, through meeting others in the community. McGowan et al. (2022) indicated that researching information around being transgender is key in forming and validating your identity as a transgender YP. Similarly, Paechter et al. (2021) reflected upon the language used to form identity and ensuring that this reflects a YP’s true feelings. All of the above studies highlighted the importance of support to navigate this exploration.

Theme 2 – Navigating ‘coming out’

All of the studies apart from Leonard (2022) described this theme. Participants presented mixed reactions to coming out, with some exploring the impact of coming out in non-supportive environments (Freedman, 2019; Bower-Brown et al., 2020; Connor & Atkinson, 2022; McGowan et al., 2022). Two participants in Freedman’s (2019) study discussed their parents being ‘dismissive’ of their identities after coming out. Four studies explored the difficulties of coming out to others without access to appropriate labels (Paechter et al., 2021; Bower-Brown et al., 2020; McGowan et al., 2022). However, two studies indicated that a greater understanding and awareness of LGBTQ+ identities has made coming out more accepted (Freedman, 2019; Morris et al., 2014). Morris et al. (2014) indicated that only two participants in their study had difficult experiences around coming out. The majority highlighted the positive process of coming out and finding acceptance amongst peers.

Three studies outlined the lack of control over this information, with some participants noting that the news of their coming out spread quickly around their setting (Paechter et al., 2021; Morris et al., 2014; McGowan et al., 2022). Some participants felt that this spread of information was helpful, due to less pressure to come out multiple times (Paechter et al., 2021; Morris et al., 2014). Participants in a more recent study indicated that the COVID-19 lockdowns delayed their coming out at school (Paechter et al., 2021).

Third-order interpretation 2 – Protective factors in school

The themes ‘Individual support and acceptance’ and ‘Whole-school approaches to support’ contributed to the third-order interpretation ‘Protective factors in school’. Within these themes, it was highlighted that support can come in different forms and can act as a protective factor for LGBTQ+ YP. Individual support, such as support from trusted adults in school and from accepting friends, can help alleviate the impact of difficulties that these YP might face. For example, having a group of supportive friends is vital in helping to prevent bullying (Freedman, 2019). Studies also outlined the importance of holistic approaches to support in school helping to protect the wellbeing of LGBTQ+ pupils. Schools actively promoting inclusivity through support groups, changes in school policy and whole-school training initiatives, indicate to these YP that they are valued members of the school community (Leonard, 2022). This third-order interpretation highlights the value of support in protecting wellbeing of LGBTQ+ pupils.

Theme 3 – Individual support and acceptance

Five studies explored this theme, with participants reflecting positively upon their experiences of support in school (Connor & Atkinson, 2022; Freedman, 2019, Leonard, 2022; McGowan et al., 2022; Morris et al., 2014). All of these studies outlined the importance of YP having trusted adults in school who they can talk to and who provide safe spaces and emotional support. One participant spoke of the positives of being able to confide in adults in school (Connor & Atkinson, 2022). Two participants in Leonard's (2022) research highlighted the appreciation they had for members of school staff who researched transgender issues to identify ways to advocate for them.

Several studies highlighted support from friends being pivotal to their wellbeing (Freedman, 2019; Leonard, 2022; McGowan et al., 2022; Morris et al., 2014). Friends can be viewed as key allies for these YP, helping them feel accepted (Leonard, 2019). Further to this, a participant in Freedman's (2019) study indicated that accepting friends protected him from peers who weren't supportive.

Theme 4 – Whole-school approaches to support

All studies aside from Bower-Brown et al. (2020) and Paechter et al. (2021) generated ideas around this theme, exploring the positive experiences of whole-school support for LGBTQ+ YP. Leonard's (2022) participants outlined positive experiences with school clubs in providing them with a platform to advocate for their rights. Participants in Morris et al.'s (2014) study highlighted the presence of support groups which had been set up in their schools to provide safe spaces for LGBTQ+ students. Further to this, they spoke about anti-bullying campaigns which helped to make their education settings more inclusive. One participant in Leonard's (2022) study shared his positive experiences of access to gendered provisions and facilities in school following his transition. He also highlighted the support he received from school in relation to the uniform, indicating the positive impact of this on his overall wellbeing. Whole-school education about LGBTQ+, including staff training and changes to the curriculum was outlined as important throughout the studies (Leonard, 2022; Connor & Atkinson, 2022).

Third-order interpretation 3 – Advocating for yourself

The themes 'Proactive protection and vigilance' and 'Concealment contributed to the third-order interpretation 'Advocating for yourself.' In some circumstances, support may not be available for LGBTQ+ YP through the typical means. In these cases, they often have to advocate for themselves,

through seeking allies, participating in activism and through choosing how they present themselves. Such actions may be “born out of a sense of necessity” (Leonard, 2022, p.80), however many YP see such activism as facilitating change for others in the community (Morris et al., 2014). This third-order interpretation outlines that self-advocacy can be a key experience had by LGBTQ+ YP, particularly when schools are less supportive.

Theme 5 – Proactive protection and vigilance

This theme was present across all of the studies apart from Freedman (2019). This theme encapsulates YP actively seeking out LGBTQ+ allies, creating communities, and engaging in activism to support themselves and others in the LGBTQ+ community (Bower-Brown et al., 2020).

Studies have indicated the need to advocate for yourself as an LGBTQ+ YP, particularly when systems such as home and school might not offer such support (Bower-Brown et al., 2020; Connor & Atkinson, 2022; Leonard, 2022; Paechter et al., 2021; McGowan et al., 2021). Bower-Brown et al. (2020) explored the motivation to improve the school environment through activism and spreading awareness. A participant in Connor and Atkinson’s (2022) study highlighted her experience of being involved in intersex activism through a support group. Leonard’s (2022) participants discussed self-advocacy and the actions that they had taken to promote LGBTQ+ rights in school, due to limited support elsewhere.

Participants in Bower-Brown et al.’s (2020) research highlighted the importance of seeking out other members of the LGBTQ+ community for support. Morris et al. (2014) also outlined the narrative of bisexual young men seeking support from others in the community.

Theme 6 – Concealment

This small theme occurred across two studies (Bower-Brown et al., 2020; Freedman, 2019). This explores how LGBTQ+ YP can “conceptually frame their experiences in order to minimise the impact of negative experiences on the self” (Bower-Brown et al., 2020, p.11). The YP in Freedman’s (2019) study highlighted the importance of protecting themselves through only coming out to those they felt safe with. Participants in Bower-Brown et al.’s (2020) research explained the disparity between their true authentic self and the self that they felt comfortable presenting to the world.

Third-order interpretation 4 – Active discrimination

The themes 'Hostility and bullying' and 'Feeling invisible' were grouped under the third-order interpretation of 'Active discrimination'. LGBTQ+ YP across the studies were shown to experience bullying and discrimination, often as a result of ignorance from others. Studies indicated that not only do these YP experience bullying from their peers in school, but they have also experienced this from teachers (Bower-Brown et al., 2020; Freedman, 2019). Three studies highlighted that LGBTQ+ pupils have experienced discrimination through teachers tolerating transphobia and schools demonstrating apathy towards the importance of acceptance of their identity. This dismissal made some YP feel as though they had to hide their identity (Paechter et al., 2021). This third-order interpretation recognises the pervasiveness of active discrimination within the school experiences of LGBTQ+ YP.

Theme 7 – Hostility and bullying

Five of the seven studies presented themes of hostility and bullying in relation to the school experiences of LGBTQ+ YP (Bower-Brown et al., 2020; Freedman, 2019; McGowan et al., 2022; Morris et al., 2014; Paechter et al., 2021). Studies highlighted a lack of societal understanding about gender diversity (Bower-Brown et al., 2020; McGowan et al., 2022; Paechter et al., 2021) and LGBTQ+ issues (Morris et al., 2014), resulting in negative reactions and bullying (Bower-Brown et al., 2020). According to Paechter et al. (2021), all participants in their study had either been bullied or were fearful that they would experience bullying if they expressed themselves at school.

Participants in Bower-Brown et al.'s (2020) study described being scared to go to school, contributing to anxiety and school avoidance. Similarly, Freedman (2019) highlighted negative experiences with a Head Teacher of a school who demonstrated homophobic behaviour.

Two participants in Freedman's (2019) study talked about experiencing physical and verbal harassment at school after coming out. Further to this, many participants in McGowan et al.'s (2022) study outlined how bullies had used deadname, or the name they were assigned at birth before transitioning and adopting a different name, and incorrect pronouns to invalidate their gender identity. Two participants in Morris et al. (2014) spoke about their experiences with discrimination due to their sexuality. One pupil experienced physical violence and homophobic slurs from his peers.

Theme 8 – Feeling invisible

Connor and Atkinson (2022), McGowan et al. (2022), and Paechter et al. (2021) highlighted the theme of 'Feeling invisible'. A participant in Connor and Atkinson's (2022) study indicated a sense of secrecy around her intersex identity. She felt that she was encouraged to keep her identity a secret from others, making her feel invisible.

McGowan et al. (2022) explored the idea that school staff can appear apathetic towards the importance of certain changes to enable LGBTQ+ YP to feel comfortable at school. One participant indicated that school staff still used their deadname. Further to this Paechter et al. (2021) outlined poor responses to bullying and transphobia in school, with some teachers being reported to ignore transphobic comments. This led to some participants feeling invisible in school, with discrimination being tolerated by those who should protect them.

Third-order interpretation 5 – Passive discrimination and invalidation

The themes 'Normativity and stereotypes' and 'School policy and procedures' contributed to the third-order interpretation of 'Passive discrimination and invalidation'. This highlighted some implicit practices in schools which contribute towards the feelings of invalidation for LGBTQ+ YP. Participants explored the impact of heteronormativity and cisnormativity on their school experiences, causing them to experience feelings of rejection (McGowan et al., 2022). Further to this, participants highlighted the impact of non-inclusive policies and procedures in place in schools, impacting their sense of school belonging (Paechter et al., 2020). This third-order interpretation outlines how passive discrimination can impact the wellbeing of LGBTQ+ YP.

Theme 9 – Normativity and stereotypes

Five studies outlined participant experiences of normativity and stereotyping (Bower-Brown et al., 2020; Freedman, 2019; McGowan et al., 2022; Morris et al., 2014; Paechter et al., 2021). McGowan et al. (2022) described a heteronormative culture in schools. Pupils who feel at odds with these cultural norms can feel invalidated. Freedman (2019) discussed the power of stereotypes and how society influences male and female gender role expectations. Participants explored the distinction between their identities and societal perceptions of gender. They discussed their gender dysphoria when they are treated as a gender that is different from how they identify. Four participants in Morris et al.'s (2014) experienced stereotypes around being bisexual, with others lacking understanding of bisexuality.

Theme 10 – School policies and procedures

This theme was present in four studies (Bower-Brown et al., 2020; Freedman, 2019; McGowan et al., 2022; Paechter et al., 2021). According to Bower-Brown et al. (2020), non-binary identities are not legally recognised in the UK. Therefore, participants in this study felt the repercussions of schools not having to reflect these identities in policies and procedures.

The non-binary participants in Paechter et al.'s (2020) study reported a lack of school policies that specifically refer to non-binary people. They highlighted that schools treat them as though they come under the 'transgender umbrella', meaning that unique difficulties may not be adequately dealt with. Due to the gendered systems in school, such as uniforms, facilities, and sports teams, it can be difficult for those who identify across or outside of the gender binary. One participant described being worried about which toilet to use at school, with the suggestion of using the disabled toilet wrongly implying that being non-binary is a disability. Similarly, McGowan et al. (2022) noted that all of their participants had experiences of rejection and invalidation due to the societal construct of gender and the policies in place at school as a result of this. For example, some participants experienced their classes in school being divided into male and female.

2.5 Review Summary and Rationale for the Current Empirical Research

The current review aimed to explore the current understanding of the school experiences of LGBTQ+ YP. The studies included within this review have contributed to a greater understanding of the educational experiences of LGBTQ+ YP, particularly those who identify as gender diverse. Seven studies were synthesised to generate insight into these experiences. The synthesis produced a number of themes evident across the studies, contributing to five third-order interpretations.

Overall, the studies included in the review were judged to be of good quality. They were all rated as high or medium-high during the quality assessment. This demonstrates the relevance of the methodology of each of the studies, alongside their relevance to the focus of the research question and the integrity of the research designs. When discussing the implications of the content of the studies included in the review, the weight of evidence ratings should be acknowledged. The highest ratings were given to Connor and Atkinson (2022), Leonard (2022) and McGowan et al. (2022) due to the clarity of their data collection and analysis techniques, alongside their use of open-ended questions and a focus on LGBTQ+ YP.

Within the review, there were key findings around the journey to understanding your identity and gaining acceptance from others. This was evident across the majority of the studies and the data indicated the importance of having the space to explore and share your identity. This demonstrated particular prevalence amongst the studies exploring gender identity and diversity (Freedman, 2019; McGowan et al., 2022; Paechter et al., 2021). One study highlighted the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic in delaying this journey (Paechter et al., 2021). This study outlined the value of exploring the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic on the experiences of LGBTQ+ YP.

Numerous protective factors were identified across these studies and these themes contributed to the third-order interpretations 'Protective factors in school' and 'Advocating for yourself'. Research highlighted the importance of support from peers and teachers in school (Freedman, 2019). Some participants explored their experiences of whole-school approaches to support through staff training and support groups, contributing to a spread of knowledge and understanding (Leonard, 2022). A number of the participants in the studies that explored gender diversity highlighted the importance of advocating for yourself as an LGBTQ+ YP (Bower-Brown et al., 2020). As these studies focused on the experiences of gender diverse YP, it may be of interest to explore whether similar protective factors are present for sexually minoritised YP in the current cultural climate.

Throughout the studies, a common theme highlighted was the discrimination faced by LGBTQ+ YP in school. The studies explored active discrimination, through bullying and apathetic approaches to support, and passive discrimination, through normativity and gendered school policies. The passive discrimination was mostly highlighted by studies which explored the experiences of gender diverse YP. This highlighted that the experiences of rejection and invalidation for these YP can be due to the social constructs of gender present in school systems (McGowan et al., 2022).

The review highlighted the existing research that has been carried out to explore the experiences of LGBTQ+ YP in schools. Most recent research has explored the experiences of gender diverse YP, with one piece of research examining the experiences of a sexually minoritised YP (Morris et al., 2014). This has indicated limited recent research around the educational experiences of YP in a sexual minority.

It is of interest to extend this exploration of the experiences of YP who identify as belonging to a sexual minority against the backdrop of changing attitudes to sexual and gender expression, legislative and curriculum changes, and the COVID 19 pandemic. Thus, the current research aimed to

build upon existing literature by carrying out semi-structured interviews with sexually minoritised YP, in hopes to shed light onto their educational experiences. It was hoped that the study would facilitate and promote a clearer understanding of the processes which can promote wellbeing for this population, alongside providing a springboard for future discussion and action in this area.

Therefore, the research question for the current study is:

What are the lived experiences of sexual minority pupils in educational provision in 2022?

2.5 Conclusion

This review aimed to present an overview of the educational experiences of YP who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community using a meta-ethnographic approach. The review was valuable for identifying the current evidence based regarding gender diverse YP in particular. However, there was limited evidence found regarding the experiences of other subgroups of the LGBTQ+ community, and therefore cannot be generalised to represent the educational experiences of the LGBTQ+ community as a whole.

The small number of studies that met the inclusion criteria, and the even smaller number of current studies involving sexually minoritised YP, has indicated a lack of research exploring these perspectives in England. The review also highlighted the limited studies involving LGBTQ+ YP that have taken place in the current social and political context, particularly post-COVID 19.

The current review presented implications for EPs and their practice. LGBTQ+ YP across the studies outlined the importance of spreading accurate knowledge and understanding regarding the LGBTQ+ community amongst school staff. A key role for EPs appears to be in assisting this understanding and encouraging school staff to feel upskilled and able to provide this support. Additionally, a key theme across the studies in this review involved the importance of respecting the identities of LGBTQ+ YP, particularly in relation to the correct use of pronouns and recognising all identities across the LGBTQ+ bracket. Therefore, within EP practice, it is important to remain aware of the LGBTQ+ community and the varied ways in which identities can be expressed.

This review supported the rationale for conducting further research to explore the educational experiences of sexually minoritised YP in England in the current context. Chapter 3 will outline the methodology adopted by the research to examine the educational experiences of YP who identify as part of a sexual minority.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will explore the conceptual frameworks which informed the research strategies employed in the current research. The rationale for the chosen study design will be considered, in relation to the research question and the overall aims of the study. This chapter will also outline the details of the data collection and analysis techniques before examining the ethical implications of the research, along with the steps taken to increase the quality and validity of the research.

3.2 Methodological/Philosophical Orientation

3.2.1 Overview

The aim of the current research was to provide an in-depth insight into how individuals who identify as part of a sexual minority subjectively perceive and experience educational provision, against the backdrop of the current cultural landscape. To justify the suitability of the qualitative approach of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis relation to this aim, it was important to explore why qualitative methodology was the most appropriate technique to address the current research question, and to explore the theoretical paradigms that underpinned this research.

3.2.2 Qualitative Research

Over time, the use of qualitative approaches to research has increased, particularly within the social sciences. Controlled quantitative studies are often unable to explain phenomena fully and generalise their data to a wider population (Billington & Williams, 2017). Qualitative research is based on the belief that representations of reality can be accessed using appropriate methods. These approaches have power in studies illuminating complex social phenomena from the perspectives of those involved (Brantlinger et al., 2005).

The current study adopted a qualitative approach to explore the lived experiences of sexually minoritised YP. The qualitative nature of the research allowed the researcher to focus on the language and interpretation of these experiences.

3.2.3 Research Paradigms and Ontological Position

When conducting real world research, an understanding of theoretical paradigms is vital as this influences every decision made throughout the research process (Mertens, 2015). A research

paradigm refers to the 'worldview' that underpins and guides a researcher's philosophical positions, alongside their methodological assumptions (Lincoln et al., 2011).

The paradigm adopted by the researcher is guided by their ontological position (the nature of reality) and informs the research epistemology (the nature of the relationship between knowledge and reality) (Mertens, 2010). The positions held by the researcher informs how they proceed to generate knowledge, and therefore the methodology adopted.

Ontological positions relate to the relationship between the world and our own interpretations and understanding of the world (Mertens, 2010). The stance taken determines whether or not the belief is held that reality can exist separately to human understanding, or whether it is felt that it cannot be separated from human practices. In which case, knowledge will only reflect the perspectives of reality (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Ontological assumptions can range along a continuum, varying from 'realist' to 'relativist' (Willig, 2013). Realism views reality as separate from the human ways of knowing about it (Tebes, 2005). This assumes that there is a 'knowable' world which can be uncovered through research to determine one 'truth'.

At the other end of the continuum is relativism. In contrast to realism, this argues that multiple constructed realities exist, and we can never get beyond these constructions to a universal knowable truth (Cromby & Nightingale, 1999). This position insinuates that reality will differ across time and context, so an understanding of the truth depends on where and how this knowledge is generated (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

A more recent position, commonly adopted in qualitative research, is critical realism (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This sits more centrally on the continuum and posits a real and knowable world which sits beneath the subjective and socially constructed knowledge a researcher can access (Madill et al., 2000). According to Rogers and Rogers (2001), the critical realist position holds that to produce knowledge that might make a difference, we need to claim that an authentic reality exists.

3.2.4 Epistemological Position

Epistemology relates to the nature of knowledge and what counts as legitimate and trustworthy knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This is informed by the ontological position of the research and

the assumptions of reality. The epistemological position adopted by the researcher determines how knowledge can be generated and, therefore, the research methodology employed (Willig, 2013).

A realist position may search for objective truths which may require an observation by a neutral researcher in the social world (Willig, 2013). This view has been frequently dismissed due to arguments that an entirely objective observation of the world is not possible (Duberly et al., 2012). It is therefore most common for epistemological assumptions to be described as objectivist or subjectivist (Lincoln et al., 2011).

An objectivist stance states that one objective truth can be sought through research. Conversely, a subjectivist stance outlines that the knowledge we generate as researchers and the data generated by participants will be shaped by our lived experiences (Lincoln et al., 2011). This knowledge is therefore subjective and based on the researcher's interpretation of these lived experiences.

3.2.5 Theoretical Position of the Current Research

Consideration of the theoretical positions discussed above led the researcher to adopt a critical realist paradigm and ontology to answer the research question. Critical realism defines an objective reality as one that exists independently of an individual's perception, rejecting claims reality is purely a social construction (Groff, 2004). However, it also recognises the role that an individual's subjective interpretation has in defining reality (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

Whilst this study aligned with some aspects of a relativist ontology and the idea that reality can be subjective and vary across individuals, this view can have potential political consequences (Sullivan, 2010). According to Sullivan (2010), adopting this stance risks creating a position where no claim or experience can be supported or refuted, therefore making it impossible to challenge aspects of discriminatory practice. For example, when adopting a relativist stance, it may be possible to hold that view that discriminatory practises like homophobia are socially constructed and not true experiences. Such a position can obscure these real, true issues affecting humans.

Critical realism is a more appropriate stance for the current research as it acknowledges a socially constructed element will exist within a person's reality, and consequently there exists multiple versions of this reality (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). However, it rejects relativist claims that all phenomena are relative and based on human perception. It highlights that there may be an objective true reality to be found and this reality can exist no matter how an experience is constructed.

Therefore, this research held the view that a reality does exist for the current participants, and their experiences of belonging to a sexual minority in their education setting. However, it was acknowledged that reality may be interpreted differently by different individuals based on their experiences.

Critical realism combines a critical realist ontology with a subjectivist epistemology (Maxwell, 2012). A subjectivist epistemology posits that reality can only ever be known imperfectly through an individual's interpretations of this; knowledge is not an objective truth (Punch, 2005). Culture and experiences shape our perceptions of the world and, regardless of individual construction, we will never reach a single truth as this will always be filtered through individual language and beliefs (Morgan, 2007). A critical realist ontology acknowledges the existence of a version of reality within which an objective truth can be found and will exist regardless of how an experience is socially constructed (Archer et al., 2016).

The current research assumed a subjectivist epistemological stance and a critical realist ontology. It did not assume that YP's experiences, alongside the researcher's interpretation of these, were objective. It recognised that within the experiences of these YP, an objective truth may be found which will exist no matter how their experiences were constructed.

3.3 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

3.3.1 IPA and its Philosophical Foundation

The philosophical assumptions outlined above guided the current research methods, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is a participant-oriented qualitative approach which draws upon critical realism and subjectivism (Smith et al., 2022). Through the application of IPA, the researcher can explore how the research participants make sense of their life experiences (Smith et al., 2022). It takes an inductive approach, aiming to identify the meanings participants place on their experiences. This offers the researcher the potential to collect a rich picture of these experiences and an opportunity to interpret these accounts to make this data meaningful when disseminated.

IPA is also informed by its philosophical background of phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Smith et al., 2022). This section will explore these three central tenets to IPA.

3.3.1.1 Phenomenology

Originally described by Husserl as transcendental psychology in the early twentieth century, phenomenological philosophy relates to the study of experience (Wertz, 2011). Phenomenologists are concerned with subjective experiences and perceptions. They hold the view that, since a single phenomenon can be experienced in a range of ways according to each individual, there must be many 'worlds' (Willig, 2013).

The intention of phenomenological research is to draw upon experiences to shape the understanding of phenomenon. It aims to "grasp the texture and qualities of an experience as it is lived by an experiencing subject" (Eatough & Smith, 2017, pg.3). Ultimately, the primary interest is to explore a person's perception of the phenomenon and how they make sense of this, rather than clarifying an objective narrative (Eatough & Smith, 2017). The researcher then seeks to interpret this account, considering the account given by the participant and the current context of the phenomenon (Smith et al., 2022).

Consistent with its phenomenological roots, IPA is concerned with how a phenomenon has been understood by a person. It attempts to explore lived experiences, with the overall aim to understand what a phenomenon is like from the perspective of the participants (Larkin et al., 2021). This is consistent with critical realism as phenomenological research draws upon an individual's perceptions in order to acquire a deeper understanding of the meaning of this experience, and critical realists are interested in how this meaning is made and the possibility of new concepts of change (Danermark et al., 2002).

The current research aimed to understand the experiences of the participants involved. It explored their reality of being a sexually minoritised YP in education. This reflected a phenomenological approach as the researcher sought to understand and make meaning of these lived experiences.

3.3.1.2 Hermeneutics

IPA is also underpinned by hermeneutics, or the theory of interpretation (Smith et al., 2022). This highlights the role of interpretation in research to uncover hidden layers of meaning within lived experiences (Frost, 2011).

This theory encapsulates the idea that to describe a lived experience, it must be interpreted. Therefore, it is impossible to reach an individual's perception without implicating your own experiences and views of the world (Moran & Mooney, 2002). According to Smith et al. (2022), the

purpose of IPA research is to endeavour to understand the speaker and their context, just as much as it is to understand the content of what they have said. The researcher must engage in discussions with participants to obtain their lived experiences and offer an interpretation (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). As a result of these interpretations and the researcher's psychological understanding, this could offer a novel perspective.

Smith et al. (2022) sought to further explore hermeneutics by drawing upon the hermeneutic circle, followed by the double hermeneutic. The hermeneutic circle recognises that to analyse lived experiences, the researcher engages in an iterative cycle. This involves following a cycle of seeing parts of the experience in the context of the experience as a whole and understanding the experience as a whole in the context of its individual parts (Smith et al., 2022).

Further to this, while IPA is based around the interpretation of the participants' experiences, the design also involves a double hermeneutic. The researcher must make sense of the views of the participant, who is making sense of their own experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Therefore, the design acknowledges the researcher's role within this process and researcher subjectivity is a fundamental resource for IPA (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Different interpretative stances are possible within hermeneutics. Larkin et al. (2021) described IPA as combining an empathetic hermeneutics with a questioning hermeneutics. It is concerned with trying to understand the point of view of participants, whilst also asking critical questions of these insights to offer new interpretations.

The current research acknowledged that individuals are experts of their own experiences. Therefore, the participants were best placed to express their perspectives to the researcher (Reid et al., 2005). It also maintained that these experiences can only be accessed imperfectly, through the researcher's interpretation (Carpenter, 2009). This is in line with critical realism as critical realism accepts a requirement to interpret a 'real' experience through the researcher (Danermark et al., 2002).

3.3.1.3 Idiography

Idiography is concerned with how we can understand the particular and the unique whilst ensuring that we maintain an individual's integrity (Eatough et al., 2017). In 1940, Allport reported the decline of the idiographic perspective in psychology and the lack of interest in individual cases in favour of a

focus on generalisation of claims. Making wide claims about human behaviour can cause research to lose the essence of the particular account of a lived experience (Smith et al., 2022)

In IPA research, there is a focus on the detailed analysis of an individual's experiences. The process of IPA begins with the 'particular' and ensures that any generalisations made are grounded in this (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2017). As a result, IPA studies adopt a small sample design, focusing on detailed accounts. This presents the advantage of offering "a personally unique perspective on [the participant's] relationship to, or involvement in, various phenomena of interest." (Smith et al., 2022, pg.29).

Idiography is in line with critical realism as a critical realist perspective holds that lived experiences should be interpreted through the introduction of wider theory if a researcher is to generalise these experiences (Danermark et al., 2002). Therefore, the researcher did not aim to generalise the current findings to the wider LGBTQ+ community, rather the findings were solely applicable to the research participants. When interpreting these findings, the researcher referred to wider theory in this area.

3.3.2 Limitations of IPA Research

When employing IPA, its limitations must be considered. Three of the key limitations are described by Willig (2013) and explored below.

Firstly, IPA relies on the representational validity of language (Willig, 2013) and it is argued that language constructs rather than describes reality. Participants construct a version of their experiences through the language used, and the same experience could be described in many different ways. Therefore, the data collected may tell us more about the way the participant talks rather than about the experience itself. However, the method of IPA attempts to address this limitation through adopting an interpretative stance and acknowledging the double hermeneutic. The researcher addressed this limitation during the analysis through approaching each interview subjectively and acknowledging the participant's context throughout the analysis, whilst continuing to recognise that knowledge about the participant's experiences can only be known imperfectly.

Secondly, phenomenological research aims to explore the rich texture of experiences and relies on the participant's description of their experience. This presents the assumption that all participants can articulate their experiences effectively. It may be that the availability of a particular way of speaking about an experience shapes the way the experience is relayed. This also excludes those who

are unable to articulate their experiences through language (Willig, 2007). Therefore, there is a concern that accounts may not capture the “subtleties and nuances of their physical and emotional experiences” (Willig, 2013, pg.283). The current research acknowledged the limitations of language and ensured that all participants were able to verbally convey their experiences.

Finally, IPA research focuses on the perceptions of the participants and aims to generate a greater understanding of the world from their perspective. IPA does not attempt to provide an understanding for why these experiences take place. This can limit our understanding of the phenomena being explored (Willig, 2013). However, IPA does attempt to interpret these experiences in light of psychological theory and frameworks (Smith et al., 2022). In the current analysis and discussion, this was represented through drawing on relevant theory and frameworks to analyse the participant experiences to gain a greater understanding of their experiences.

3.3.3 Additional Approaches Considered

When approaching the analysis of qualitative research, there are a number of alternative methods that can be employed. Three of the methods considered for the current research are outlined below. Given the current research questions and the theoretical grounding of the research, IPA was chosen as the most appropriate method.

3.3.3.1 Grounded Theory

Grounded theory was developed as a method seeking to generate a theory relating to the phenomena forming the research focus. This approach allows researchers to move from the data obtained to theory which is ‘grounded’ in this data (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Data is gathered and analysed to develop themes for further data collection. This process is repeated until there are no new categories to uncover, resulting in theoretical saturation. This approach could be relevant to the aims of the current study and was considered in the early stages of research development. However, contrary to the current research, grounded theory focuses on the perspectives of a group of individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon of interest, it then builds inductive theories regarding this phenomenon through data analysis. It does not seek to understand the lived experiences of the phenomenon and therefore lacks an idiographic focus.

3.3.3.2 Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis is a discursive approach to research, concerned with the role of language and how this is used to generate identities and activities. Meaning is produced through analysing text and exploring what is said, why it is said, the power represented, and the impact of the text (Willig, 2013). Due to its focus on language and how it constructs meaning, discourse analysis is strongly aligned with social constructionism. Whilst discourse analysis allows for a focus on language and its role in the construction of a phenomenon, its focus is removed from the individual participant. It also does not address the impact of the participant's social context (Willig, 2013). It was felt that this would not allow for a rich exploration of lived experiences and the interpretation of these perspectives, as outlined in IPA.

3.3.3.3 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a qualitative approach to data analysis that involves the identification and reporting of patterns or 'themes' within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This is a flexible approach to data analysis, allowing the researcher to have autonomy over their methods (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Furthermore, thematic analysis is not associated with a pre-existing theoretical framework and can therefore be used within different theoretical frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The literature suggests that thematic analysis encapsulates a range of qualitative approaches, rather than one single method and different versions will be underpinned by different philosophical and conceptual assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2021). These techniques can provide focus and insight when working with a larger sample of participants, when a researcher is focusing on patterns of meaning across this data set (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

In contrast to thematic analysis, IPA asks for a smaller sample of participants due to the idiographic focus of the approach (Smith et al., 2022). IPA also gives experience primacy and is about understanding lived experiences in detail (McLeod, 2001). Therefore, it was felt that IPA would be the most appropriate approach to answer the current research question.

3.3.4 Rationale for IPA for the Current Research

Based on the theoretical background of IPA, as discussed above, alongside the exploration of alternative methods of qualitative research, IPA was chosen as the most appropriate method for the current research.

The current study drew on the individual educational experiences of a small sample of sexually minoritised pupils. IPA was felt to be an appropriate research design for this study as it relies on a small, homogenous sample group and is focused on capturing the experiences of these individuals (Smith et al., 2022). Studies suggest that YP are experts of their own experiences so are in the best position to express their accounts to the researcher (Reid et al., 2005). According to Braun and Clarke (2021), the use of IPA is most appropriate for research focusing on personal experience and specifies using interviews to collect first-person accounts.

Further to this, according to Smith and Osborn (2015), IPA is a useful method when used to explore topics which are complex, ambiguous, and emotionally laden. Phenomenological research offers an idiographic perspective, providing people with a safe space to meaningfully capture their experiences (Orbe, 2000). In relation to the current research, this helped to provide a voice for a marginalised group and access the potential commonalities of these experiences, whilst acknowledging that diversity will exist across these experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2015; Orbe, 2000). This maintained the philosophical framework adopted by the researcher, recognising that a reality does exist for these YP, however this can only be known imperfectly.

Through the application of IPA, the researcher could explore the unique experiences of sexually minoritised pupils and develop an interpretation of these experiences. These interpretations can be shared with professionals, allowing others to gain an understanding of what it is like to be a sexually minoritised pupil in an educational setting (Carpenter, 2009).

3.4 Research Design

3.4.1 Sampling and Participants

3.4.1.1 Sample Selection

Studies have highlighted that 'less is more' when it comes to participant numbers in IPA studies (Reid et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2022). According to Smith et al. (2022), due to the idiographic nature of IPA research, studies benefit from smaller sample sizes. IPA research conducts a detailed case-by-case analysis of the individual transcripts and writes in detail about these experiences. Therefore, three to six participants are recommended for IPA research (Reid et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2022).

When conducting IPA research, samples should be selected purposively, as these participants will offer a particular perspective into the research phenomena (Smith et al., 2022). Therefore, in the current study, participants recruited were sexually minoritised students.

IPA research aims for a homogenous sample, depending on the specificity of the study and the practicalities of accessing this population (Smith et al., 2022). If the experience in question is common and participants are easily accessible, the sample may focus on participants from specific demographics (Landridge, 2007). However, if an experience is less common, the researcher must be selective about which factors should be considered for homogeneity (Smith et al., 2022). Therefore, the following criteria were used to select the participants for the current study, based on them having shared experiences of being in a sexual minority and attending an educational setting:

- YP who self-identify as belonging to a sexual minority (As outlined in the current APA 'Inclusive Language Guidelines' (2020).
- YP who are between 15-18 years old.
- YP who attending a mainstream educational setting.

During the initial stages of planning the current research, it was suggested that participants were to be aged between 15 and 16 years old and attending a mainstream secondary setting, as these pupils were likely to have accessed the new LGBT-inclusive RSE curriculum (DfE, 2019). However, concerns around recruitment were held due to difficulties accessing this population and obtaining parental consent for those under 16. Therefore, within the ethics application, a contingency plan was made whereby the age limit for participants was increased to 18.

It was decided that YP with heightened emotional needs who felt they could be negatively impacted by the topics discussed in the interview would be excluded from the research. Whilst the researcher ensured sensitivity throughout the interview process, it was highlighted that the research could bring up sensitive topics which could cause emotional distress.

The decision was made to include YP who attend a mainstream educational setting and to exclude YP who have specific Special Educational Needs that may affect their ability to engage with the interview. For example, YP who might struggle to verbally share their views.

3.4.1.2 Recruitment Process

When accessing hard to reach groups or those resistant to identification, sampling can be difficult (Sullivan & Losberg, 2003). Therefore, random and representative sampling methods are not always effective (Bettinger, 2010). For the current research, participants were recruited through purposive sampling, following guidance from Smith et al. (2022). This is a non-probability sampling method in which the researcher uses personal judgement to select participants based on who they feel would be informative (Polit & Beck, 2012). This is one of the most common sampling methods used when working with hard-to-reach groups, such as LGBTQ+ individuals (Bettinger, 2010).

Due to the potential difficulties identifying pupils for the current study, the researcher initially approached an LGBTQ+ youth group within the Local Authority area, in which the researcher was undertaking a two-year placement as a Trainee EP. Youth groups can act as a safe space for LGBTQ+ individuals to meet and explore their gender identity and sexuality. Such groups therefore provided the researcher with a pre-existing, self-identified population.

After ethical permission was granted for the current project, the researcher approached the leaders of three LGBTQ+ youth groups to explore the possibility of disseminating information about the current study to their members. The researcher shared information about the current study through presentations and through sharing posters (See Appendix F). Although several YP showed interest initially, in the end no participants could be recruited through this approach due to concerns around parental consent and difficulties accessing local youth groups. The implications of this were discussed further in the ethics section of this chapter.

Following this, the researcher adopted an 'opportunity sampling' approach. This non-probability sampling technique consists of the researcher selecting any participant who is willing and able to participate (Smith et al., 2022). Information about the current research was disseminated through emails to interested parents and YP in the LGBTQ+ community, following posts on social media. Interested participants then approached the researcher to obtain a consent form and a parental consent form (Appendix G), if required. The four final participants were recruited this way.

3.4.1.3 Final Participant Sample

In total, four participants were recruited for the research project, in line with the guidance provided by Smith et al. (2022). Sexually minoritised YP are part of a vulnerable population and face additional challenges, particularly in relation to discrimination. Therefore, the current research introduced

further measures around confidentiality to ensure participant safety. Care was taken to protect the identities of the participants through minimising identifiable information and by using pseudonyms.

A brief pen portrait for each participant is outlined below, providing contextual information whilst maintaining confidentiality.

Participant 1 – Ash

Ash is 18 years old and is non-binary, preferring they/them pronouns. They are currently in their first year of their Art and Design course in college. They first realised that they identified as bisexual, with a preference for women, at 12 years old. Their confidence grew and they were first open about their sexual identity during the COVID 19 lockdown periods. As they explored their identity further, they realised that they identify as pansexual. Pansexual is a label that indicates sexual or romantic attraction to people regardless of their gender expression, gender identity, or biological sex (Rice, 2015).

Participant 2 – Ben

Ben is 16 years old and identifies as a transgender male, adopting he/him pronouns. He attends a mixed-sex sixth form setting. Ben first identified as bisexual, however as he started learning more about different sexualities, he began to identify as pansexual and polyamorous. Polyamory is characterised by a person being open to having simultaneous consensual romantic relationships with multiple partners (Mitchell et al., 2013).

Participant 3 – Cam

Cam is a 17-year-old cisgender man who identifies as gay. He is in his second year of college studying graphic design. He is comfortable with his identity as gay and is gender role non-conforming. This means that Cam enjoys expressing his identity through his clothes and accessories, which might not align with his gender identity (Bailey & Zucker, 1995).

Participant 4 – Dan

Dan is 17 years old and identifies as a transgender male, adopting he/him pronouns. He attends a mixed-sex sixth form setting and he identifies as pansexual.

As discussed above, when conducting IPA research, it is important for the sample to be homogenous (Smith et al., 2022). The final sample was divergent in terms of their gender. The YP also differed in

terms of their age and education setting. However, given the difficulties regarding recruitment, it was felt that this sample was appropriate for the current study.

Based on the information provided by the participants, the education settings are relatively homogenous in terms of size, with between 1000-1500 pupils attending the sixth form settings and 1500-2000 pupils attending the colleges. Both of the college settings are general further education colleges. Some key differences in the settings include the disparity between sixth form and college, and the location of the settings. Two participants attend sixth form settings attached to secondary schools and two participants attend colleges. Previous research has suggested differences in attitudes towards LGBTQ+ YP in colleges compared to schools, with colleges appearing more open and accepting (McCormack, 2012). Ash attends college in an urban area, whilst the other three participants attend settings in rural areas. There has been some indication across the research that attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people may be more negative in rural areas compared to urban areas, which may impact the school/college climate for LGBTQ+ YP (Lee, 2019). It will be important to consider the potential impact of these factors on the lived experiences of the participants when reading the results of this research.

3.4.2 Data Collection

3.4.2.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Following guidance outlined by Smith et al. (2022), data was gathered through semi-structured interviews. Such in-depth interviews allow participants to provide “a rich, detailed, first-person account of their experiences” (Smith et al., 2022, pg.53).

The open-ended questions used in semi-structured interviews allow for a dialogue to be established between the researcher and participant within which initial questions can be modified based on participant responses (Royse et al., 2009). This permits the researcher to generate a greater depth of understanding, moving away from superficial and generic answers. The one-to-one format of these interviews encourages a rapport to be built, providing the space for personal discussion (Smith et al., 2022).

Focus groups were considered for this research, incorporating groups of YP to generate a range of insights (Palmer et al., 2010). When carried out effectively, focus groups can capture “some of the relational and social meanings of an experience” (Smith et al., 2022, pg.125). However, it was felt

that, given the sensitive nature of the research, a focus group may have not adequately supported the safe disclosure of personal experiences. This may have prevented some group members from feeling comfortable enough to share their experiences. Further to this, the researcher wanted to maintain their attention on the phenomenological and idiographic nature of IPA research, through focusing on the in-depth exploration of individual experiences.

3.3.2.2 Development of the Interview Schedule

When developing an interview schedule, it is vital that the data collection process is comfortable for the participant (Smith et al., 2022). When interviewing LGBTQ+ participants, it is especially important to acknowledge terminology used by the researcher, as this can impact the rapport building (Adams et al., 2017).

To generate a comfortable interview environment, the interviewer can develop a guide for the topics they would like to be discussed and frame questions in an open format (Smith et al., 2022). It is also suggested to avoid questions which are over-empathetic, manipulative, leading or closed (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011). If an interview lacks depth and participants haven't been appropriately probed by the researcher, then the data will be too thin for analysis.

Smith et al. (2022) suggest a schedule of between six and ten open questions, along with prompts. The current schedule was developed using a range of question prompts for in-depth interviews, as outlined by Smith et al. (2022). These questions initially focused on building a rapport with the participant, using narrative and descriptive questioning techniques. The questioning then focused on eliciting reflective and evaluative responses as participants became more comfortable with the interview process. A pilot interview and discussions with a university supervisor allowed the researcher to reflect upon the content of the questions and whether any further questions should be included within the schedule (See Appendix H for the final interview schedule).

3.4.2.3 Conducting the Interviews

Data collection took place between December 2022 and January 2023. The interviews were held on a one-to-one basis. To provide greater ecological validity, interviews were conducted in a setting in which the participant could feel reassured that their answers would not be overheard (Smith et al., 2022).

Participants were asked about where they would feel most comfortable to be interviewed. One of the interviews took place in the YP's home and three took place over videocall, with participants calling in from a private space in their home. Prior to the interviews, the researcher provided participants with an information sheet outlining that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time (Appendix I). Participants were then asked to read and sign a consent form, including consent for the interviews to be recorded (Appendix G).

Prior to recording, the researcher spent time conversing with the participants to build rapport. During the interview, it was important for the researcher to focus fully on the participant (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011). The researcher employed active listening skills to elicit rich insight.

As anticipated in the ethics application, the participants touched upon some personal and sensitive topics. The researcher had to monitor the interviews carefully to ensure that participants felt comfortable enough to continue. Following the interview, participants were provided with a debrief sheet, providing information on their right to withdraw and signposting to relevant services to approach if required (Appendix J).

3.4.3 Data Analysis and Evaluation

3.4.3.1 Transcription

Each interview was transcribed verbatim, including pauses, laughter, corrections, etc (Smith et al., 2022). This is an intensive process of transcription during which the researcher must be meticulous. This allows the researcher to become immersed in the data, encouraging familiarity before the analysis process (Smith et al., 2022).

See Appendix K for an example of a transcription.

3.4.3.2 Analysis in IPA Studies

IPA analysis is an iterative and inductive cycle (Smith, 2007). The purpose of IPA research is for the researcher to explore how individuals make sense of their experiences; therefore, the researcher must become immersed within the data (Reid et al., 2005). The focus of analysis is on the insights provided and how participants have made sense of their experiences.

IPA aims to be a flexible approach to analysis and literature “has not prescribed a single ‘method’ for working with data” (Smith et al., 2022, pg.75). Despite this, the approach to IPA analysis can be

characterised by a set of common processes and principles. The current data was analysed using the process outlined in Smith et al. (2022). Given the idiographic nature of IPA research, the first five stages of analysis were completed for each interview, before analysing subsequent transcripts.

3.4.3.2.1 Stage 1: Reading and Re-Reading

The first stage involved total immersion in the data through repeatedly listening to the audio recording and reading through the transcript. This stage ensured the researcher could make the participant the focus of the analysis (Smith et al., 2022). Whilst engaging in this process of immersion and familiarisation, the researcher began to make note of recollections of the interview and key observations. This helped to remove the focus from any initial ideas, encouraging a focus on the data.

3.4.3.2.2 Stage 2: Exploratory Noting

The next stage of analysis was an exploratory examination and focused on the examination of semantic content of the data and the language used. The researcher continued to gain familiarity with the data and kept an open mind, noting anything of interest. The notes were recorded on the left-hand column of the transcript. Exploratory noting typically examines three areas: descriptive, linguistic and conceptual comments (Smith et al., 2022).

Descriptive comments focus on describing the content of what the participant has said. This will include things that matter to the participant such as key objects, events and experiences. Such aspects have a phenomenological focus and remain close to the explicit meaning. Linguistic comments examine the specific language used by the participant. These features can involve metaphors, pronoun use, pauses, laughter, functional aspects of language, repetition, tone and the degree of fluency. Conceptual comments take an interrogative form, asking questions of the data to move towards a conceptual understanding. This involves a shift in focus for the researcher, moving towards exploring the participant's overarching understanding of their experiences. This can sometimes involve personal reflections from the researcher. See Appendix K for an example of exploratory noting on a transcript from the current study.

3.4.3.2.3 Stage 3: Constructing Experiential Statements

This stage was key in providing space for the researcher to consolidate and crystallise any thoughts had so far. All data collected and generated so far formed the focus of this stage of analysis. The task at this stage was to create experiential statements, relating directly to participant experiences or to

their experience of making sense of what has happened to them. These statements reflected the researcher's understanding of these experiences.

The process of constructing experiential statements can introduce a manifestation of the hermeneutic circle, reflecting the iterative nature of IPA (Smith et al., 2022). Analysis begins to move away from being participant-oriented and the focus moves to the researcher's interpretation. See Appendix K for an example of constructing experiential statements from the current study.

3.4.3.2.4 Stage 4: Searching for Connections Across Experiential Statements

Once a set of experiential statements has been established for the transcript, connections must be sought across them. The researcher drew together the statements to produce a structure incorporating all of the most important aspects of the data.

The most common approach to identifying connections is looking for similarity between statements and grouping them based on their relatedness. Another device is polarisation, where conflicting statements are purposefully brought together to highlight their contradictory aspects. Narrative organisation can help to provide theoretical leverage when a key sequence of events is seen to unfold within the participant's lived experience (Smith et al., 2022).

The researcher used a manual approach to generate connections. Experiential statements were written onto separate sticky notes. These were distributed on a surface to separate this stage of analysis from the initial ordering of the statements, facilitating a conceptual ordering (Smith et al., 2022). Different possibilities of organising the statements were explored to reach what was considered the best way to map their interconnections (See Appendix L).

3.4.3.2.5 Stage 5: Naming the Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) and Consolidating and Organising them into a Table

Each group of experiential statements was given a title to describe its contents. The clusters became the Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) (Smith et al., 2022). PETs represent the highest level of organisation for the statements across the transcript. These can then be divided into subthemes and within each subtheme will be the initial experiential statements. For the current study, the researcher noted each PET and its experiential themes, then devised a title based on the contents of the PET (See Appendix M).

3.4.3.2.6 Stage 6: Continuing the Individual Analysis of Other Cases

Stages one to five were repeated for each transcript, maintaining an idiographic perspective. When approaching the remaining transcripts, it was vital to maintain the integrity of the individual data (Smith et al., 2022).

3.4.3.2.7 Stage 7: Working with PETS to Develop Group Experiential Themes Across Cases

This stage involved exploring connections between the PETs to create a set of Group Experiential Themes (GETs). The aim of this cross-case analysis was to “highlight the shared and unique features of the experience across the contributing participants” (Smith et al., 2022, pg.100). A label was then be chosen to capture the GET.

During this stage, all of the PETs and subthemes from each interview were collected on coloured sticky notes correlating to the interview they originated from. These were organised into GETs based on the links between the PETs (See Appendix N). The results from this process are presented in chapter 4.

3.4.4 Quality and Validity in IPA Research

When conducting qualitative research, the research quality and validity should be evaluated. Due to the diversity across qualitative approaches, evaluating qualitative research can present difficulties. Traditional methods of evaluation seek to obtain objective truths and were established based on positivist and realist ontological and epistemological perspectives (Yardley, 2000). However, as described in section 3.2.5, whilst the current research rejects claims that reality is purely a social construction, it does recognise the role of subjective interpretation in defining reality.

These criteria focus on reliability of research and the idea that the findings should be replicable. This expectation directly contrasts with the idiographic and double-hermeneutic nature of IPA approaches (Shenton, 2004). IPA relies on the researcher’s interpretation of the data collected so whilst the study could be replicated, it is unlikely that the same results will be obtained.

To address these concerns, Yardley (2000) outlined four broad principles to evaluate quality and validity in qualitative research. These principles are posed as guidelines which are open to interpretation. These principles are considered below in the context of the current research.

3.4.4.1 Sensitivity to Context

Sensitivity to the context of theory and research can be sought through the knowledge gained from previous research in the area (Yardley, 2000). A critical appraisal of the relevant literature can then help to formulate the research questions addressing gaps in this area. Sensitivity to context was addressed in the current research through identifying a gap in the research to explore the lived experiences of sexually minoritised YP in the current context. The literature review allowed the researcher to develop the current research question and rationale for the methodology undertaken. This also afforded the researcher with insight into the context within which the research is situated.

An IPA approach maintains an idiographic stance, allowing the participant's views to be central. Within the current research, sensitivity was maintained by making sure that any interpretations made were grounded in the original data (Smith et al., 2022).

3.4.4.2 Commitment and Rigour

To maintain commitment and rigour, the study must select an appropriate sample, conduct a high-quality interview and ensure a complete analysis is undertaken (Smith et al., 2022). For the current research, purposive sampling allowed an appropriate sample size to be chosen. The researcher spent time generating appropriate interview questions. Interviews were transcribed to allow for immersion in the data and for an in-depth analysis. The researcher then followed a reputable method for IPA research to analyse the data (Smith et al., 2022).

3.4.4.3 Coherence and Transparency

When conducting qualitative research, the data should be presented coherently so that there is clarity in the arguments made and that the research makes sense as a consistent whole (Yardley, 2000). The current study demonstrated coherence through adhering to IPA principles. The rationale for the research was situated in the relevant literature and the methodology was justified.

Research should also demonstrate transparency, with each stage of the research process being clearly outlined (Yardley, 2015). The current research-maintained transparency by making the framework clear and explaining the analysis process so that the reader could see each decision made. Further examples of the analysis process have been included in the appendices.

Another aspect of this principle is reflexivity which will be explored later on in this section (section 3.4.4.5).

3.4.4.4 Impact and Importance

This principle outlines whether the research provides theoretical and practical insights and leads which may have an impact on future practice in this area (Yardley, 2000). The current research aimed to provide insight into the experiences of sexually minoritised YP, highlighting any practice that may be helpful in supporting these YP through education. The impact of the research will be considered in the discussion chapter of this research, including recommendations for future research.

3.4.4.5 Reflexivity in IPA Research

Reflexivity is a key aspect of IPA research due to its phenomenological basis (Frost, 2010). When conducting phenomenological research, it should be acknowledged that the researcher and the subject of the research can equally affect each other and the researcher will have an influence on the knowledge produced (Haynes, 2012).

Being reflexive involves adopting an awareness that the researcher could hold a hidden, unacknowledged bias in relation to the area of interest. The researcher must seek to turn a critical gaze upon themselves to identify ways they could be influencing the research (Frost, 2010). If pre-conceptions are identified, then the researcher can separate what is 'mine' from what is 'theirs' (Frost, 2010).

In light of the importance of reflexivity in qualitative research, the researcher will outline some relevant details of their background and beliefs following guidance set out by Langridge (2007). This will support the reader's understanding of the researcher's stance and will ensure that the researcher remains aware of their potential biases.

3.4.4.5.1 Motivations for the Current Research

The researcher's motivation to carry out this piece of research was fuelled by her own experience of the education system and by their experiences as a TEP. These experiences encouraged the researcher to explore this area further, specifically the support available for sexually minoritised YP.

3.4.4.5.2 Relationship to the Research Area

Reflexivity is particularly prominent when the researcher is working with a population whose experiences and identity differ from their own. The researcher considered themselves an 'insider' of the research population. As a sexually minoritised person who has experience of being educated in England, the researcher shared some of the characteristics of the current participants. However, the researcher could be considered an 'outsider' due to being of a different generation to the participants

and not having experiences of the education system in the current context, following the COVID 19 pandemic.

Two of the three participants identified as non-binary. This made the researcher an 'outsider' due to not having experience of questioning their gender identity. Whilst the umbrella term LGBTQ+ groups gender identity and sexuality together, it should be recognised that these groups will have different experiences (Grant et al., 2011). These differences mean that the researcher could not assume their experiences of the education system would be similar to those of the participants.

Furthermore, the researcher recognised that they held strong core beliefs about the presence of discrimination in the English education system. This did cause the researcher to empathise with participants who had difficult experiences. However, during the current research, it was important that the researcher's own experiences and views did not overshadow the participant views.

During the data collection process, participants may have viewed the researcher as an adult who may not relate to their experiences. This may have impacted how they interacted with the researcher, and the richness of the data. The researcher also recognised that they may have had emotive responses to the topics being discussed. The researcher aimed to address these potential responses through research into this area, ensuring awareness of current issues facing YP.

To maintain reflexivity throughout the current research project, particularly in relation to developing the interview schedule, conducting the interviews and the data analysis, the researcher had regular supervision and kept a reflexive research diary (Appendix O).

3.3.5 Ethical Considerations

Research highlights that LGBTQ+ YP are a vulnerable population who require additional measures to ensure their safety (Fisher et al., 2008; Harris et al., 2021). Therefore, ethical concerns were acknowledged and addressed throughout the research process. All actions taken conformed to the BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct (2018) and the University of Nottingham Ethics Guidelines. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Nottingham Ethics Committee (Appendix P).

Due to the nature of the current research, involving working with vulnerable YP and recalling experiences, attention was paid to gaining informed consent, ensuring protecting from harm and ensuring confidentiality. These three areas are outlined in more detail below.

3.4.5.1 Informed Consent

Gaining consent for vulnerable YP to take part in research can be a barrier to participation. For some sexually minoritised YP, gaining parental consent could compromise their safety, particularly if they feel unable to be open about their identity at home. For the current research, potential participants were advised that they would need parental consent to take part if they were under 16. It was highlighted by the researcher that participation was voluntary and parental consent should only be sought if this would be safe. Difficulties gaining parental consent prevented two YP from participating. The implications of this will be acknowledged in the discussion section of this report.

The 16-18 age range can present ambiguity in regarding the requirement for parental consent. According to the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2021), there is uncertainty regarding the age at which a child should be viewed as an adult and can take part in research without parental consent. The UK age of majority is 18, however the Mental Capacity Act defines a YP aged 16 years or older as an adult. Therefore, the BPS (2021, p.16) outlines that participants aged 16-18 should be “acceptable for sole consent on part of the young person for low-risk research, but if in doubt parental consent should be sought as well.” The researcher safeguarded the participants through screening procedures and through debrief materials (see section 3.4.2.3). This helped to ensure that their participation was low risk.

The four YP research participants were 16 or over and did not require parental consent. They were provided with an information sheet (Appendix I) prior to their involvement outlining all aspects of the research. They were also given the opportunity to ask questions before signing the consent form. This highlighted that they could withdraw from the study up until the data analysis stage.

3.4.5.2 Protection from Harm

The researcher acknowledged that the research could touch on sensitive topics which may cause emotional distress for the participants. Therefore, steps were taken to minimise this risk. During recruitment, participants were asked about their emotional resilience, and this was included as part of the consent procedure. The interview schedule was carefully developed to ensure the appropriateness of the interview questions and the terminology used. This ensured sensitivity when information gathering, recognising that participants may have had emotional reactions to topics.

Following the interview, a debrief sheet was provided, highlighting relevant support services to access if additional support was needed (Appendix J).

3.4.5.3 Confidentiality and Anonymity

Steps were taken to ensure the anonymity of the participants. Each participant was provided with a pseudonym and additional contextual information was kept to a minimum.

Audio recordings of the interview were carried out using two voice recorders. Following the interview, these recordings were saved securely and permanently deleted from the recording devices. Similarly, all transcripts were saved securely. These will be permanently deleted following the successful completion of the Doctorate.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodology adopted for the current study. The chapter began by examining the philosophical position taken by the researcher, and how this aligned with the research design and method. A description of IPA was provided, outlining its philosophical foundations and the rationale for using IPA for the current research. The researcher then explored the research design, including the participant sample, data collection techniques and data analysis and evaluation. The aspects of quality and validity in IPA research were acknowledged, along with ethical considerations. The next chapter will display the research findings, exploring the educational experiences of sexually minoritised YP.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will outline an account of the IPA of the educational experiences of sexually minoritised YP. This analysis was based on the researcher’s own interpretation of the narratives provided through interviews with four sexually minoritised YP. Therefore, the Group Experiential Themes (GETs) and associated Group-Level Sub-Themes described were a result of a double hermeneutic.

This section will present the overarching GETs and associated Group-Level Sub-Themes. This will be followed by an in-depth exploration of each Group-Level Sub-Theme, presenting direct quotes from each interview and the researcher’s interpretation of their meaning and significance, with reference to the research question (Smith et al., 2022):

What are the lived experiences of sexual minority pupils in educational provision in 2022?

The four participants are re-introduced in Table 4.1 to contextualise the data.

Table 4.1

Re-introduction of the research participants.

Participant	Biography
Ash	Ash is an 18-year-old college student who identifies as pansexual. Their gender identity is non-binary (they/them).
Ben	Ben is a 16-year-old sixth form student. He is a transgender male (he/him) and identifies as pansexual and polyamorous.
Cam	Cam is a 17-year-old college student who identifies as gay. He is a cisgender male (he/him) who is gender role non-conforming.
Dan	Dan is a 17-year-old sixth form student. He is a transgender male (he/him) and is pansexual.

4.1.1 The Group Experiential Themes and the Group-Level Sub-Themes

Five GETs were identified following analysis, all of which were shared across the participants. This consistency of themes indicated a level of similarity across experiences. Tables were included to represent the presence of the GETs across the participants. Each GET comprised of two to four related Group-Level Sub-Themes (See Table 4.2 for a list of GETs and their associated Group-Level Sub-Themes).

Table 4.2

Group Experiential Themes (GETs) and associated Group-Level Sub-Themes.

Group Experiential Themes (GETs)	Group-Level Sub-Themes
The Journey to Discovering an Identity	The freedom to explore your identity
	Barriers to expressing your true self
	Being your own best advocate
Building a Supportive Community	The importance of finding a supportive community
	Gaining support from your community
When Support from Your Education Setting Falls Short	Lack of education and understanding in education settings
	Lack of appropriate support in education settings
	Lack of appropriate consequences for discrimination in education settings
The Reality of Belonging to a Sexual Minority in the Current Context	The COVID 19 Pandemic
	Fears around being open about your identity
The Impact of Positive Support from Your Education Setting	Experiencing judgement and discrimination
	Protective factors in place in education settings
The Impact of Positive Support from Your Education Setting	Support with Gender Identity
	Drive to create positive change for the community

4.2 The Journey to Discovering an Identity

This GET appeared to be key and was consistently raised throughout the interviews. When asked about their identities, the participants seemed to describe a journey to expressing their true selves, fraught with barriers. In turn, the participants highlighted the importance of remaining strong and being their own best advocates, allowing them to express their identities in their education settings. Table 4.3 outlines which participants shared this GET and how the Group-Level Sub-Themes were spread across the participants.

Table 4.3

Group-Level Sub-Themes for the GET ‘The Journey to Discovering an Identity’.

The Journey to Discovering an Identity				
Group-Level Sub-Themes	Ash	Ben	Cam	Dan
The freedom to explore your identity	X	X	X	X
Barriers to expressing your true self	X	X		X
Being your own best advocate	X	X	X	X

4.2.1 The Freedom to Explore your Identity

A theme that arose across the interviews was how participants experienced a period of exploration regarding their sexuality whilst in education. For three participants, this process also took place in relation to their gender identity. Having the freedom to explore identities and having access to the resources to support their understanding was key for the participants:

Well...I first started out by identifying as bisexual...erm...and then as I started learning more about it and I had friends and I currently have friends who are part of the community as well...and they've educated me and I've educated myself... (Ben, 10-12)

...there was obviously things on the media that was like... there's this erm label and there's this label and there's this label...and it's like you can also be unlabelled! And it's like...it's really free and it's really open! (Ash, 107-108)

It seems that each participant sought additional support along their journeys, be this from peers or from resources online. The language used by Ash seemed to indicate their excitement (Ash: *it's really free and it's really open!*, line 108). This could also outline that whilst exploring your identity is positive and exciting, it could be an overwhelming experience too. The repetition by Ash of “*there's this erm label and there's this label and there's this label*” (Ash, 107) generated a sense of overwhelm that YP may experience.

For Dan and Ash, the COVID 19 lockdown period provided them with space to explore different identities without the pressure of explaining themselves to those in their education settings:

... I think to be fair COVID was quite useful for me because it gave me that time to kind of like discover myself without feeling you know like the eyes of all my peers were on me all the time... (Dan, 22-24)

...that was a whole...an experience of erm...discovering myself discovering new things er understanding more about myself...erm...and like...I had a very big open attraction to women... (Ash, 95-96)

Dan seemed to maintain the narrative of this process being overwhelming, particularly in relation to explaining yourself to others. Lockdown provided him with a safe space to understand his feelings before coming out. Similarly, Ash described lockdown as a key time in discovering their identity.

This period of exploration seemed to allow the participants to discover the fluidity and openness of sexuality, leading them to feel comfortable expressing their identity to others:

...that I didn't really like...have a restriction of people...and just kind of liked everybody... (Ash, 24)

...I express myself...like I wear a lot of pink... (Cam, 17)

...come to realise that I am pansexual and polyamorous... (Ben, 12)

For some, this period of exploration also led to a greater understanding of their gender identity:

...also led me to discover my erm... (long pause) own gender...identity...which er...I now identify as...non-binary... (Ash, 25-26)

I'm trans, female to male and I identify as pansexual... (Dan, 2)

At the current stages of their journeys to finding themselves, each participant seemed happy and proud to express themselves to the interviewer. This appeared to show that despite this process being overwhelming and daunting, each participant seemed comfortable with expressing themselves in their education settings.

4.2.2 Barriers to Expressing your True Self

Three participants highlighted factors that presented as barriers to them expressing their identities. Two participants outlined the impact of others in their education settings and at home questioning their identities, resulting in feelings of confusion and doubt:

...She kind of was like "Okay...erm are you sure?" y'know kind of advising me... being like "you're a bit too young to understand all of these different things..." (Ash, 10-12)

And she kind of said "are you sure you don't want to be those girls and it's not that you're attracted to them?" and I was like "hang on a minute!" ...so I thought about it for a bit and then I...oh my god literally came back to her a week later and I was like "erm I think I'm straight y'know" ... (Ash, 14-16)

...I was in a lesson and people were kind of asking me a lot of questions about my sexuality and erm I have anxiety so erm I was struggling to answer them anyways... (Dan, 50-51)

Ash explained that being questioned caused them uncertainty. Dan described the anxiety this questioning seemed to cause him. Both participants highlighted the importance of others respecting their identities and not questioning their feelings.

Following on from this, two participants outlined that belonging to a minority group has been a barrier to expressing themselves. When participants' identities diverged from the norm, they seem to have experienced judgement from those who are misinformed. This resulted in participants being reluctant to express themselves:

...I mean most of the kids that I go to school with are like cisgender and heterosexual there's a very small grouping of us who are part of the community so there aren't many that you can relate to in that sort of sense...and...some of them are very uneducated... (Ben, 17-20)

...even if you are gay or part of the community it's hard to be open about it because students can be...can be nasty... (Dan, 81-82)

Ben's reference to "a very small grouping of us" (Ben, 18-19) seemed to highlight how he may feel that belonging to minority group could make YP susceptible to experiencing discrimination.

When a YP belongs to a minority group, the opportunity for self-expression seems to be key in allowing them to express their identity and feel comfortable with who they are. Ben highlighted barriers to self-expression, hindering his ability to express himself in his setting:

...like in my school specifically uniform is very strict... you can't have many badges, you can't wear certain types of make-up, you can't have your hair in a certain style or a certain colour...like for all children self-expression is something that should be practised because it can be really damaging if schools like restrict that...and I know for queer kids, self-expression is one of the only ways that you can like express who you are at school...because...they make you...look like everyone else ...but they...take that away from you and that's something that is very very annoying! (Ben, 125-135)

Ben outlined the importance of self-expression and the impact that it has had when his school “make(s) you look like everyone else” (Ben, 131-132). His language appeared to highlight his frustration that YP are restricted in their self-expression in a school environment (Ben: *that is very very annoying!*, 135).

4.2.3 Being Your Own Best Advocate

A key theme present across the participant interviews was the importance of self-advocacy. All four participants highlighted that they have had to protect themselves from the adversities they were faced with when expressing their identities in their education settings.

The participants seemed driven to take action to protect themselves from judgement and discrimination. Some had withheld information about their identity until they felt safe to express this, and others ensured they had access to adequate support:

...I didn't really like-I wasn't open about it in secondary because I knew it wasn't a safe space and I knew-not a lot of people who I knew were also out at the same time and so erm...I kept to myself... (Ash, 19-21)

...obviously like I said with some children, they're very misinformed so it can be a little bit scary to do that but (be your true self) ...as long as like my friends are there, I'm usually okay... (Ben, 82-83)

The participants outlined the action they needed to take to stay safe in their education setting. These narratives seemed to highlight the importance of self-advocacy for these YP.

Additionally, Cam seemed to use language to distance himself from events happening in the world. This appeared to reflect his true concern about events targeting sexual minoritised individuals:

...like there was a sh-shooting in America again at a gay club and that...well-it's always just scary to hear about but I guess...since I'm in England guns are...way more restricted so it's easier to...not easier to hear...but you know what I mean... (Cam, 20-22)

Throughout the interviews, the YP seemed to use humour as a coping mechanism. When asked about the current cultural and political context and how this has impacted his experiences, Ben responded “*mhmm (laughs)...(tut) ermm...well (tuts)...it's a bit weird I suppose (laughs)...*” (Ben, 17). Similarly, when discussing a poignant part their journey to discovering themselves, Ash joked about their experiences, stating “*Y'know...it's looking a bit gay to me! (laughs)*” (Ash, 99). The use of humour to make light of these difficult experiences, highlighted the strength of these YP in the face of adversity.

4.3 Building a Supportive Community

This GET was prominent across the interviews. Each YP highlighted the importance of friendship, especially those within the LGBTQ+ community. This theme of building a supportive community occurred repeatedly and seemed to outline the power that a supportive community can have for sexually minoritised YP. Participants explored how peers, partners and family members provided guidance and acceptance during their educational experiences. It was important to explore this GET and how experiences of community may impact upon the YP's experiences of their education settings. Table 4.4 displays the Group-Level Sub-Themes within this GET and how these related to each participant.

Table 4.4

Group-Level Sub-Themes for the GET 'Building a Supportive Community'.

Building a Supportive Community				
Group-Level Sub-Themes	Ash	Ben	Cam	Dan
The importance of finding a supportive community	X	X	X	X
Gaining support from your community	X	X		X

4.3.1 The Importance of Finding a Supportive Community

The theme of friendships occurred throughout the interviews. When asked about the support they have received, the YP immediately described their friendships in their education settings:

...the people that I hang round with people that...they're all pretty y'know open and even if they are heterosexual, they will just be allowing and understanding... (Ash, 130-132)

...my group of friends that are like really understanding... (Dan, 124-125)

This recurrent theme of friendships and community appeared to emphasise the value the participants place on surrounding themselves with people they feel safe with. The repetition of “*understanding*” highlighted how both Dan and Ash feel supported and accepted by their friends.

The YP also emphasised the importance of having friends within the LGBTQ+ community:

I'm pretty-I'm pretty okay with the way it feels in college ...only because pretty much all my friends...all my friends are pretty much some kind of queer...on that spectrum...everyone in my college group are... (Cam, 10-13)

I had friends and I currently have friends who are part of the community as well... (Ben, 11-12)

...pride parades...I've never went to those but I'd love to go because obviously it's such y'know...where I belong ...with people who are like me... (Ash, 61-62)

For Dan, these friendships are not always in person, and he has created an online support system with friends in the community:

Interviewer: Yeah okay...is there anything outside of school that you find particularly supportive?

Dan: Yeah, erm to be fair it's literally just all of the people in the community that I've met online... (Dan, 110-111)

During the interviews, the repetition of the word “*community*” seemed to emphasise the value of belonging to a group of like-minded individuals. Participants appeared to indicate that identifying as part of a sexual minority has allowed them to feel a part of a community of people have offered support and guidance during their time in education.

Two participants described their settings having student-led support groups which have allowed them to be surrounded by others in the community. These safe spaces seem to have provided the opportunity for these YP to express themselves without judgement and to explore their identities with others on similar journeys:

...at my school erm...we do have a er inclusion and equality club... (Ben, 29-30)

I'm erm one of the co-leaders of an inclusivity and equality group at school.... erm and so it's not just for LGBT it's for like any like neurodiversity anyone who kind of identifies in a like minority group at all... (Dan, 65-67)

Alongside exploring the value of supportive friendships, three participants spoke of the importance of supportive families and how this seems to make expressing your identity less daunting. Ash and Ben highlighted family members who have been supportive of their identities:

...we're very open about everything...and my parents are completely supportive of us and it's...yeah... (Ash, 54)

...I mean I've got some family members who have definitely been...supportive...and I've-I've got family...not much...but I've got a few members of my family who are also part of the LGBTQ+ community... (Ben, 75-77)

These YP seem able to be open with their family as they feel accepted and supported, allowing them to be themselves both in their education settings and at home. In contrast to this, Dan discussed the difficulties he experienced when sharing his identity with his family:

...erm because like my home life...isn't...my mum isn't very supportive of the fact that I'm trans and like my relationship and stuff erm so I can't really be that open like about who I am at home... (Dan, 121-123)

Dan outlined how he has had to restrict his sexual orientation and gender identity at home due to lack of acceptance from his family. He contrasted this with his group of friends at school who have been “*really understanding*” (Dan, 125). He appeared to feel that he could be more open about his identity in his education setting than at home. This highlighted the importance these YP place on having accepting families and on building a community of friends who they can rely on for support.

4.3.2 Gaining Support from Your Community

Across the interviews, the YP spoke about gaining support and acceptance from their built communities; or the people with whom they feel safe around and accepted by. They highlighted the positive impact this has had on their educational experiences as part of a sexual minority.

The importance of friendships consistently reoccurred when participants discussed when they felt most supported in education. Each participant spoke of their friends within the community, with whom they could express themselves without fear of judgement:

Interviewer: Brilliant and when would you say do you feel the most supported to be your most authentic self?

Ben: Definitely when I'm with my friends er...probably just when we're out having fun...
(Ben, 80- 81)

Dan's response seemed to echo Ben's:

Int: Okay and when would you say you feel the most supported to be your true self...to not have to explain yourself to anyone...when would you say that would be?

Dan: Erm probably just with my like-like my closest group of friends... (Dan, 119-121)

These participants seemed to feel accepted by their friends and able to express their identities without judgement.

When the YP have feared for their safety in their education settings or when they cannot access additional support, their friends seem to have been a constant source of reassurance. Two participants described having to rely on their friends for guidance and advice when support from school was lacking:

...with some children, they're very misinformed so it can be a little bit scary to do that but...as long as like my friends are there, I'm usually okay... (Ben, 82-83)

...I-I mean obviously I'm with CAMHS erm...however it was-obviously because of COVID everything was com-really really overrun and really busy and so I didn't get very much support there...it was-it was literally just finding other people who are in the same boat as me and getting support off them- so like meeting people online and stuff... (Dan, 34-37)

Dan and Ben explained the frustration of struggling to access additional support and highlighted that their friendships were vital during these times. Dan's use of the words "*in the same boat as me*" (Dan, 36) appeared to indicate the solidarity he has felt with his peers. He continued to speak about the value of his community and how they have empathised with his experiences:

It's just the fact that they can actually put themselves into my shoes...just that like it's all like well and good someone saying like "oh that's really-that's really awful I'm sorry that's happened" ...they don't actually understand how it feels... (Dan, 131-133)

Ash also discussed the importance of shared experiences:

I'm ...trying to discover my sexuality and she was like "me too, I'm y'know I'm kind of on the fence... I feel like I am bisexual" and as the years progressed and we were both like... identify as pansexual, she identifies as pansexual and we kind of discovered that from there... (Ash, 43-46)

Such shared experiences seem to have provided Ash with reassurance that they are not alone on their journey.

The participants also outlined how their communities seem to have helped them along their journeys to understanding themselves, through allowing them to ask questions and providing advice:

...and I currently have friends who are part of the community as well...and they've educated me and I've educated myself and...come to realise that I am pansexual and polyamorous... (Ben, 11-12)

...erm I mean like my sister she's bisexual and she-anytime I had any questions or...she's also got friends who are part of the community so she's said to me before "if you need to ask them any questions then you can" ...so that's been a support for me... (Ben, 77-79)

...erm and as I was kind of discovering who I was I didn't have any at all...and so it literally was just the support of my partner and from all of my friends and stuff... (Dan, 28-29)

Similarly, Ash discussed how their friend provided advice regarding which education setting would be the most inclusive for Ash to attend, given how they identify:

My friend who was in college already she was advising me about er which college to go to and she was like "definitely come to mine!" ...definitely it's very inclusive it's all this...and I was like "great...amazing...oh I want to come there!" (Ash, 208-210)

This seems to show how important it is for sexually minoritised YP to have a supportive community to provide reassurance and advice.

During their interview, Ash outlined the support they have received from their online community when discovering their identity. This appears to have been valuable for YP during the COVID 19 pandemic, when access to their support systems was restricted:

...there was obviously things on the media that was like... there's this erm label and there's this label and there's this label...and it's like you can also be unlabelled! And it's like...it's really free and it's really open (Ash, 106-108)

This highlighted the value of social media in providing Ash with a resource to support them to understand themselves. This was especially prominent during the COVID 19 pandemic when YP may have felt isolated from their typical support systems at school or college.

4.4 When Support from Your Education Setting Falls Short

This GET outlined the shortcomings of the education settings attended by the participants in providing additional support for sexual minorities. Despite the positive support from their education settings described by some participants, the theme of inadequate support arose across the interviews. Participants discussed the lack of understanding of their peers and setting staff, resulting in misinformation and discrimination. Participants appeared to indicate that positive support might be available for some, however it does not support everyone in the community and in some cases it can appear tokenistic. A reoccurring narrative was around the lack of appropriate consequences for discrimination. Participants also discussed the lack of support from their education settings during the COVID 19 lockdown periods. Table 4.5 displays the Group-Level Sub-Themes for this GET and how these were spread across the participants.

Table 4.5

Group-Level Sub-Themes for the GET ‘When Support from Your Education Setting Falls Short’.

When Support from Your Education Setting Falls Short				
Group-Level Sub-Themes	Ash	Ben	Cam	Dan
Lack of appropriate support in education settings	X	X	X	X
Lack of education and understanding in education settings	X	X	X	X
Lack of appropriate consequences for discrimination in education settings		X	X	X
The COVID 19 Pandemic	X	X		X

4.4.1 Lack of Appropriate Support in Education Settings

When participants described their experiences of support in their education settings, a common narrative was that appropriate additional support appears to be lacking sexual minority pupils. Dan and Ash highlighted the low bar that YP like themselves have to set for additional support in education settings:

No, I wouldn't say they're necessarily like brilliant. I just wouldn't say there's anything you know like awful either (laughs)... (Dan, 17-18)

...I think they've done pretty much enough to kind of say "look we are inclusive" ... (Ash, 193-194)

Dan went on to explain the frustration he has felt about not receiving adequate additional support at school:

Interviewer: Mm okay...and how does that make you feel that there's limited support available at school?

Dan: (sigh) erm I think...I don't know really it's (sigh)...it's hard... (Dan, 79-80)

Dan's hesitation and his sighs whilst answering this question seemed to highlight his disappointment.

Cam also described the lack of appropriate additional support available for him in college. He outlined that whilst support may be available for some, this has not been accessible for all YP:

There are like groups you can go to...there are-they-the like-I haven't been to any because I'm either in a class or not on that day (Cam, 27-28)

But then there was also like an LGBT club and...but that's on Wednesdays and I'm not in on Wednesdays (laughs)...like I'm not going to go in for an hour for that...erm but I guess that's there... (Cam, 31-32)

Cam's emphasis on the word "can" ("*there are like groups you can go to*", Cam, 27) appeared to highlight that this additional support has not been accessible to him. His laughter following "*I'm not in on Wednesdays*" (Cam, 31-32) appeared to indicate his frustration that the additional support offered by college has not been accessible. Despite education settings attempting to set up LGBTQ+ support groups, the current findings seem to have indicated that this support does not reach everyone leaving some YP feeling frustrated and unseen.

Ash outlined that they have felt supported in college. However, they emphasised that every experience is different and that such support might not be accessible to some sexually minoritised YP:

...I think if it was somebody else who was very y'know...shy about themselves and very erm...not so confident, not out of the closet y'know has a whole family situation back at home...it would be a different scenario it would be err if somebody didn't feel included didn't feel accepted...I think they would have a different opinion and they would definitely say something like "there would need to be a change"... (Ash, 187-191)

Similarly, Dan discussed the disparity amongst those in the community regarding appropriate support. With regard to support groups, he said:

...I've never found any of that particularly helpful...erm I think as well because there-there is some people who are so like...open with their sexuality...it can be quite intimidating... (Dan, 113-115)

These participants highlighted that additional support for sexual minority pupils in education settings needs to consider the varying needs of those in the community.

All four participants seemed to highlight that inclusive practice in their education settings can appear tokenistic. The YP seemed to highlight an emphasis on inclusive practices for gender diverse students in their settings. The participants appeared to outline that such practices can appear tokenistic and

easy, rather than carefully though through additional support for the wider LGBTQ+ community, including sexual minorities. When asked about the additional support from their education settings, the participants responded through highlighting support for gender diverse YP:

...there are-there's a board in one of the sections with like displays and stuff...but like-but it was very random and it was like trans icons... (Cam, 28-29)

I think they've done pretty much enough to kind of say "look we are inclusive" and erm that pronouns matter, deadnames matter..." we...understand that you have changed your name legally" erm and all that...but I feel like no nothing else... (Ash, 193-196)

These YP seemed pleased by these inclusive practices, with Dan stating, *"I think the school couldn't really have done much better"* (Dan, 42-43). However, Ben emphasised that the inclusive practice for gender diverse YP seems to be *"foundational support"* (Ben, 70).

Whilst the YP seemed to view inclusive practice for gender diverse YP positively, there was some indication that additional support and inclusive practice is lacking for sexually minoritised YP:

Yeah...or get someone...like if someone comes and is like "I'm feeling this way...but I don't know if it means this or this or this" ...they could be like "well typically it means this" ...but they can like give advice and things like that yeah... (Cam, 75-77)

This seemed to highlight the importance for LGBTQ+ YP to be seen as individuals, with distinct requirements for additional support.

4.4.2 Lack of Education and Understanding in Education Settings

The participants outlined the lack of education and understanding from peers and school staff regarding the LGBTQ+ community. They explored the misinformation amongst those in their education settings, impacting their safety and wellbeing.

A key narrative presented was that of peers in school being misinformed, resulting in prejudice and discrimination. Ben discussed his hesitance to be open about his identity in school due to fear over the reactions of his peers:

I mean sometimes at school but sometimes obviously like I said with some children, they're very misinformed so it can be a little bit scary to do that... (Ben, 82-83)

He seemed to indicate that these instances of discrimination could be prevented through educating these pupils about the LGBTQ+ community. He seemed to feel that helping YP to understand LGBTQ+ experiences could encourage inclusivity:

...sometimes people unintentionally erm like discriminate against somebody and it is just because they don't...realise that this is not something you are supposed to say or this is something you can't do... (Ben, 109-111)

Similarly, Ash outlined their difficulties with peers who lack understanding of LGBTQ+ identities:

Obviously, I want to be as open as possible, but you've got to understand that...not every will...accept you, not everyone will...go to that length of...y'know erm allowing you to be yourself (Ash, 124-126)

Ash appeared to indicate that they have felt restricted by the views of their peers. They seemed frustrated when stating “not everyone will...go to that length of...y'know erm allowing you to be yourself” (Ash, 126). This appeared to highlight that peer misinformation has caused Ash to hide their identity in college.

A theme emphasised by the participants was the importance of teachers being educated regarding support for sexually minoritised YP. Dan highlighted the importance of having a member of school staff who “completely understands” (Dan, 93). He seemed to indicate that staff in his school lack this understanding, making access to additional support in school difficult:

...because a lot of the teachers as well they don't have the knowledge and the understanding of...what LGBT is...like our drama teacher-we had to stand there and explain to her the other day like what being pans-pansexual was...(long pause) and so I just think that it would be nice to have someone who does completely understand and can support you if you need it... (Dan, 93-97)

Dan seemed to emphasise his frustration with the lack of understanding from teachers. As a result, he has to educate his teachers about the LGBTQ+ community. He indicated the importance of having access to school staff who understand his identity.

Dan went on to explain how his teachers have been hesitant to support him due to their lack of understanding:

...but the teacher just kind of looked past it...they didn't-cause I kind of asked them later like "why didn't you say anything?" and they said well they didn't want to offend me because they might have said something that was homophobic...but I don't understand why...she didn't have the training and the knowledge to understand what she can and cannot say...and still put a stop to it kind of thing... (Dan, 152-156)

Dan's use of the words "I don't understand why" (Dan, 154) appeared to highlight his frustration at the lack of understanding of school staff. He seemed to indicate that he cannot rely on members of school staff to keep him safe at school as they have limited understanding of his identity. His narrative also seemed to outline that, without training and knowledge, teachers can be apprehensive to provide additional support for sexually minoritised YP for fear of causing offense.

Similarly, Cam outlined that his teachers lack understanding of the LGBTQ+ community and that they should be trained to support YP appropriately:

...having someone who is more educated in that area...having them in that situation...like someone who won't just come in and be like "blah blah blah" ... (Cam, 72-73)

Cam's use of the statement "blah blah blah" (Cam, 73) as the support typically received from college staff appeared to insinuate his disappointment. He appeared to have had negative experiences with school staff who do not have appropriate insight.

In contrast, Ben outlined individual teachers in his school who have been understanding and have offered additional support:

...but I erm have a couple of teachers who have been very like supportive and if anyone has ever said anything to me, they usually will be on my side... (Ben, 66-67)

Ben's narrative appeared to indicate that there are school staff who are willing to learn to support LGBTQ+ YP. However, these teachers seemed to be in the minority for the current participants.

The participants highlighted how they had not received adequate education regarding same-sex relationships whilst they were exploring their identities in school. They emphasised the value of such education and how this would have supported them through their early experiences, alongside providing other pupils with a better understanding of the LGBTQ+ community:

I think it would be helpful for everyone...cause then...it takes the stigma away from anything...like that ... (Cam, 46-47)

...I feel like there just needs to be a little bit more information put out there...and a bit more...y’know...it’s not “all kids are born heterosexual” ...it is a...y’know a spectrum of things and so you can’t not allow kids to understand sexuality... (Ash, 147-149)

These participants outlined the importance of informing YP about same-sex relationships. When asked whether a curriculum involving information about same-sex relationships would have had a positive impact on his experiences, Ben responded:

Definitely yes...because I mean obviously as a queer person myself it...I then only know what to do if I was in a heterosexual relationship...but when I’m not I’m a bit lost I would have to approach the internet or my friends or something like that...so it would definitely be a useful thing to have...not just for me but for a lot of other people... (Ben, 60-63)

His emphasis on “Definitely” (Ben, 60) seemed to indicate that Ben would have benefitted from such a curriculum. He appeared to feel that “a lot of other people” (Ben, 63) would also benefit, particularly if they are unsure and exploring their identity. In his experience, a lack of appropriate education at school meant that he had to educate himself through approaching friends or looking online.

4.4.3 Lack of Appropriate Consequences for Discrimination in Education Settings

Three participants outlined their frustration in relation to the lack of consequences that their peers have received for instances of discrimination in their education settings:

...schools tend to...they look at it but they don’t do as much as they could...if that makes sense...people especially children of the community go to teachers all the time and say “something said this to me...or someone’s bullying me because of who I identify as” and it’ll pretty much just be like a stern talking to for the person involved and then it doesn’t really get...looked at again... (Ben, 101-104)

...they were being rude but then they just kept getting warnings and getting warnings... (Cam, 64-65)

The YP appeared to outline how they have felt overlooked by their education settings when they have experienced discrimination. Similarly, Dan discussed how the lack of repercussions for discriminatory behaviour has allowed the perpetrators to continue:

Dan: ...there is lads in there who are constantly being homophobic to another student in there...but the teacher just completely looks past it and ignores it...

Interviewer: There's not repercussions from that?

Dan: No none absolutely nothing...

Interviewer: So, it's just left to happen again?

Dan: Yep... (Dan, 167-172)

The use of the words “*No none absolutely nothing*” (Dan, 170) appeared to emphasise Dan’s frustration and disappointment with the support he has received at school. When Dan struggled to expand on his answers it seemed to highlight his concern that these instances would reoccur. He appeared to feel unable to rely on the support of school staff to prevent discrimination.

When asked about a more appropriate approach to these incidents, the YP emphasised education of their peers to encourage understanding and prevent reoccurrence:

...I just think...educating them would be a really good thing to do and like- I know they say that “we’ll be speaking to your parents” but...they never...say why it’s a bad thing that they’ve done...they just sort of say “well you can’t say this because it’s bad” (Ben, 106-108)

This seemed to highlight the importance of education settings setting out appropriate consequences for instances of homophobia and bullying so LGBTQ+ YP feel safe in their settings. The participants emphasised that they should feel supported in their settings and those who discriminate against them should experience appropriate consequences.

4.4.4 The COVID 19 Pandemic

Three participants highlighted the impact of COVID 19 lockdown periods on their educational experiences. Lockdown seemed to cause feelings of isolation and uncertainty for these YP. They emphasised the lack of additional support they received from their education settings during lockdown and upon returning to their settings:

Interviewer: What were your experiences of school following that lockdown period...do you think erm you were supported during that period and coming back to school?

Ben: Erm...I-I would say I felt quite isolated during that period...I mean erm obviously it's different at...all schools...but specifically at my school there isn't much support anyway...so (sigh) getting it in school can be a little bit difficult...never mind when you're at home and it's very like...secluded and you can't contact your teachers as easily and things like that...so when it came to like...er quarantine and... afterwards it was mostly just friends who were there to support you... (Ben, 43-49)

Ben outlined the minimal additional support he received from school during the lockdown period. The terms “*secluded*” and “*isolated*” appeared to stress how alone Ben felt during this time. He emphasised that his school was providing him with little support under typical circumstances and the lockdown period seemed to cause this support to reduce further. His sigh following “*but specifically at my school there isn't much support anyway*” (Ben, 46) seemed to emphasise how powerless Ben may have felt during this time. Finishing his reflection with “*afterwards it was mostly just friends who were there to support you...*” (Ben, 49) appeared to insinuate Ben’s disappointment with his school, alongside the emphasising importance of the support he gained from his community during this time.

Dan also outlined the lasting impact of COVID 19 on accessing support for his mental health:

...because of COVID everything was com-really really overrun and really busy and so I didn't get very much support there... (Dan, 34-36)

Dan seemed to experience difficulties gaining support for his mental health, causing him to feel dissatisfied and let down. His description of services being “*really really overrun and really busy*” (Dan, 35-36) seemed to emphasise his frustration that was unable to access these services due to them not having the capacity.

Ash also discussed their experience of the COVID 19 lockdown and how this impacted their capacity to access their typical support systems:

Yeah lockdown was a hard time...I had social media...like messenger...erm and c-could erm...talk to people...but that's not the same as being in person and...having someone to talk to about it all...and the media can be a scary place when you are confused... (Ash, 111-113)

They appeared to highlight how difficult it was for them to be away from their friends when trying to figure out their identity. Their use of the terms “hard”, “confused” and “scary” seemed to emphasise feelings of unease they experienced during this period. As discussed in section 4.3, for these YP, their friendships seem to have been key in discovering themselves and feeling accepted. According to the participants, COVID 19 uprooted them from these support systems, causing them to feel isolated whilst trying to explore these new feelings.

4.5 The Reality of Belonging to a Sexual Minority in the Current Context

When interviewing the participants, they discussed the impact of the current social and cultural context on their experiences in their education settings. They also outlined their experiences of discrimination and their fears regarding being open about their identities. This GET explored these experiences and highlighted the hardships that sexually minoritised YP can face in their education settings, particularly without appropriate support. Table 4.6 displays the Group-Level Sub-Themes for this GET and how these were spread across the four participants.

Table 4.6

Group-Level Sub-Themes for the GET ‘The Reality of Belonging to a Sexual Minority in the Current Context’.

The Reality of Belonging to a Sexual Minority in the Current Context				
Group-Level Sub-Themes	Ash	Ben	Cam	Dan
Fears around being open about your identity	X	X	X	X
Experiencing judgement and discrimination	X	X	X	X

4.5.1 Fears Around Being Open About Your Identity

The participants outlined the impact of the current social and cultural context on sexual minoritised YP. More specifically, the impact of the media and the negative ways that sexuality can be viewed. Each YP seemed aware of the current climate and expressed concern over the impact of this on themselves and their communities:

...my friend did a presentation where they used a case study from (the local area) ...about erm a woman who identified as a lesbian and she got like murdered because like because

people weren't happy that she was gay and then...since then people have been a lot more kind of even-like not-even like just not as nasty... (Dan, 140-144)

Dan outlined that a case study presentation produced by a friend at school highlighted to him and his peers how hate-crime regarding sexual orientation can occur on their doorstep. Dan appeared to demonstrate concern that those in the community can be targeted in this way because “*people weren't happy that she was gay*” (Dan, 142). The close proximity of this murder seemed to shock Dan and his peers at school.

Cam also discussed the extreme instances of discrimination that he had seen in the media:

Interviewer: And do you feel impacted by anything that has been happening in the media?

Cam: I think sometimes...like there was a sh-shooting in America again at a gay club and that...well-it's always just scary to hear about... (Cam, 19-21)

His hesitation when discussing this shooting seemed to highlight Can's concern about such events. This narrative seemed to indicate that the access that YP have to the media can make such incidents highly relevant and scary for them.

All four participants appeared to express fear about being open about their identities publicly due to concerns around judgement and discrimination. When discussing his experiences in school, Ben highlighted feeling fearful of others who are misinformed, causing him to hide his identity:

...erm...not-I mean sometimes at school but sometimes obviously like I said with some children, they're very misinformed so it can be a little bit scary to do that... (Ben, 82-83)

Ash also discussed their fears of being open due to the judgement of others:

Yeah, you've just got to be really careful because th-there are still r-really dangerous people around...y'know it's not a fun place to be... and erm it's been-I've definitely been really erm nervous about going into these places... (Ash, 132-134)

The sentence “*th-there are r-really dangerous people around*” (Ash, 132-133) and the hesitation when saying these words seemed to highlight Ash's concerns about being open about their identity. They emphasised the need to be “*careful*” when expressing their sexual identity. Ash continued discuss their reservations to be open about their identity at school:

...because I knew it wasn't a safe space and I knew-not a lot of people who I knew were also out at the same time and so erm...I kept to myself... (Ash, 20-21)

The narrative that Ash's school environment was not safe and that they felt like they had to hide their identity highlighted the fear that they felt.

Cam also highlighted that he has had to keep to himself to protect himself, particularly when he has been unable rely on his education setting to prevent discrimination:

Yeah, it was annoying having to keep my head down and they were doing this thing and it's constant warnings and warnings and warnings and I'm like I wish they would just get over it... (Cam, 67-68)

His use of the sentence "*I wish they would just get over it...*" (Cam, 68) seemed to emphasise Cam's frustration with hiding his identity in college and feeling fearful of his peers.

4.5.2 Experiencing Judgement and Discrimination

Alongside discussing their fears around being open about their identities, the participants also spoke about their experiences of discrimination. These narratives highlighted the reality of being a sexually minoritised YP in an education setting in the current context:

...I did previously experience bullying in...the secondary...just because I-I existed and that happens...I...was...still at that time er trying to figure out er my sexuality and so to throw on top of that...that...y'know "I'm queer" ... (Ash, 202-204)

...I mean most of it just is people being uneducated or bigoted...like I've had arguments with people before or I've just been hate-crimes by people before ...but that's definitely something that I have endured before that I would like it to be more looked at and maybe more serious... (Ben, 97-101)

Ash described their experiences of bullying "*just because I-I existed*" (Ash, 202). They appeared to highlight the difficulties they had faced whilst figuring out their identity were exacerbated by these experiences of discrimination.

Ben expressed a powerful narrative surrounding the hate-crime he experienced at school. He stressed his frustration towards those who are "*uneducated*" and "*bigoted*". Ben's use of the word

“endured” appeared to insinuate that this discrimination has occurred frequently and that his school has done little to prevent it.

Cam and Dan also contributed to this theme:

...because students can be...can be nasty but like recently there's been a couple of incidents where-where people have been hate-crime members of the community...and like there was...there was basically no support... (Dan, 83-84)

I er-there's some-er I-last year there was someone who was-well they were-they were saying mean things-but it was also to me and my friend...cause they didn't like my friend anyway but...then (sigh)...they were being rude... (Cam, 62-64)

Dan seemed to express his concern over the incidents that have occurred in his school. He recognised the dangers of being open about his identity. Similarly, Cam outlined his frustration with the peers in his school and their lack of understanding.

4.6 The Impact of Positive Support from Your Education Setting

This GET highlighted the positive experiences that participants have had in their education settings. Two YP described protective factors in place in their settings which have helped them to feel seen and safe. The participants also outlined the positive support available for those questioning their gender identity. The Group-Level Sub-Theme of ‘Drive to Create a Positive Change for the Community’ focused on the determination of two participants to make changes in their school settings in support of other LGBTQ+ YP. This Group-Level Sub-Theme related to just two participants; however, it was felt that the actions taken by these YP warranted being highlighted as a Group-Level Sub-Theme and not hidden under a different heading. Table 4.7 shows the Group-Level Sub-Themes for this GET and how these were spread across the participants.

Table 4.7

Group-Level Sub-Themes for the GET ‘The Impact of Positive Support from Your Education Setting’.

The Impact of Positive Support from Your Education Setting				
Group-Level Sub-Themes	Ash	Ben	Cam	Dan
Protective factors in place in education settings	X		X	
Support with Gender Identity	X	X	X	X
Drive to Create Positive Change for the Community		X		X

4.6.1 Protective Factors in Place in Education Settings

Ash and Cam discussed the positive additional support available to them in college as members of the LGBTQ+ community. Ash seemed to feel that their experiences of additional support in college had been positive, especially in contrast with lack of additional support they experienced in secondary school:

I don't think so I think y'know if...(sigh) let's say somebody was getting bullied at like college...erm they would definitely say something... (Ash, 200-201)

...especially at college erm I feel very open er y'know I know that many queer people they just feel like it's such an open and free place... (Ash, 192-193)

Further to this, in contrast to student-led support groups (Section 4.3.1), Ash mentioned a college-led group established to support LGBTQ+ students. They highlighted how this group had helped them and others in the community to feel seen:

...someone who would come down to the canteen...and they would do all these like LGBT things...and so we would have like...we had like these tote bags that we could draw on and just all erm...LGBT-inclusive... (Ash, 169-171)

Like a club kind of thing...yeah yeah...and so err they use that as like a-a LGBT inclusive and they talk openly about their experiences... (Ash, 183-184)

Ash spoke positively about the additional support available to them at college. The repetition of the word “inclusive” throughout their interview when discussing their college seemed to highlight that they have felt supported and valued in this environment.

Whilst he had not been able to access the LGBTQ+ support groups at his college, Cam highlighted that additional support would be available for him in college if he required it:

Interviewer: Great so there are some avenues if you need that support?

Cam: Yeah, there are some...yeah... (Cam, 36-37)

4.6.2 Support with Gender Identity

The participants seemed to struggle to identify additional support and inclusive practice in their education settings in relation to their sexual orientation. However, three participants outlined inclusive practices for gender diverse YP. Two of the current participants identified as transgender males, and one identified as non-binary. Therefore, these YP all appear to have benefitted from the inclusive practices in their settings regarding gender diversity.

These three participants discussed how their education settings have demonstrated inclusive practice for gender diverse YP:

Yeah, questionnaire things...and they were like “what identity are you?” ...“what pronouns do you want to be called?” ...y’know...“what name do you pre-prefer?” (Ash, 160-161)

I have a couple of friends who are transgender and there have been a fair amount of teachers in the school who they have gone to and they have said... “hey could you use these pronouns for me”... “and this name”...and they’ve been happy to-to oblige and they’ll correct anyone who...doesn’t... (Ben, 67-70)

These participants spoke highly of such inclusive practice. Ben’s use of the phrase “they’ve been happy to oblige” (Ben, 69) seemed to demonstrate the ease with which some members of school staff have adopted these practices to support gender diverse pupils. Dan also described a positive experience with his school when he came out as transgender:

Interviewer: Yeah okay...and is there anything that your sixth form has done to support you?

Dan: Erm they changed my name on...the erm...like on the system so now teachers know that I don’t use my old name anymore...erm they...so erm...they gave me a new lanyard card so I didn’t have to see my old name...erm and then sent out an email to all of my

teachers erm with my pronouns and stuff...so yeah...to be fair my-my process was really really good it was...I think the school couldn't really have done much better...

Interviewer: That sounds excellent...they sound like they've been really inclusive and really supportive-

Dan: -Yeah they've been great... (Dan, 38-45)

Whilst Cam did not mention specific inclusive practice for gender diverse students in his college, he did mention a display of support for transgender individuals:

...there are-there's a board in one of the sections with like displays and stuff...but like-but it was very random, and it was like trans icons, and I thought that was very cool... (Cam, 28-29)

Such narratives appeared to demonstrate that some education settings seem to be making some steps in progress to support the inclusion of gender diverse pupils.

4.6.3 Drive to Create Positive Change for the Community

This theme arose following the interviews with Ben and Dan. They outlined their drive for change and the actions they have taken to create a safe and inclusive school environment for their communities.

Ben highlighted the actions he had taken in his school to ensure that others are educated about the LGBTQ+ community, to prevent misinformation and to reduce prejudice:

...I mean I'm also part of the philosophy club...at my school and we have discussed...erm like gender identity and sexuality before and we've had a couple of members who have...had misinformation...or said things that are-aren't q-quite correct... (Ben, 20-22)

...schools don't...as-as like just the school...they don't tend to educate as much...it's usually up to the students to do that... (Ben, 28-29)

Ben seemed to describe taking the frustrations he had been holding regarding the additional support for sexually minoritised YP in his school and channelled this into educating others and preventing misinformation. He appeared to demonstrate his drive to make lasting change in his school.

Similarly, Dan described situations where he felt driven to educate his peers. In contrast to Ben's experience, Dan tried to educate his teachers to increase awareness of the LGBTQ+ community amongst school staff:

...because a lot of the teachers as well they don't have the knowledge and the understanding of...what LGBT is...like our drama teacher-we had to stand there and explain to her the other day like what being pans-pansexual was... (Dan, 93-95)

Despite appearing frustrated by the limited understanding of some members of school staff, Dan seemed driven to educate his teachers to improve the support for his sexual minority peers. Whilst he recognised the importance of educating others, Dan also outlined that answering questions can be difficult:

...well for me I was erm...I was in a lesson and people were kind of asking me a lot of questions about my sexuality and erm I have anxiety so erm I was struggling to answer them anyways... (Dan, 50-52)

Dan indicated that he has found educating others difficult, but that he will continue to do so to advocate for himself and his community.

Alongside providing education to others to improve the school experiences of sexually minoritised YP, Dan and Ben discussed helping to establish student-led support groups. Dan described the importance of establishing this group for himself and his peers:

I'm erm one of the co-leaders of an inclusivity and equality group at school.... erm and so it's not just for LGBT it's for like any like neurodiversity anyone who kind of identifies in a like minority group at all...erm but we do cover a lot about LGBT and a lot of the members are part of the community... (Dan, 65-68)

He highlighted that he established this group to provide additional support that had not been available to them in school:

Interviewer: Mm yeah okay...and is that group student-led then?

Dan: (sigh)...yeah so, it's very student-led, it's me and-it's myself and another lad who's also part of the community... (Dan, 75-77)

He indicated that before this group was established there was little access to additional support for him in school:

...erm but that's only been introduced this year...and so like last year there wasn't really anything that-there wasn't any support really if you-if you needed to talk to someone you went of the you know the normal paths like the counselling waiting list and you'd be waiting for the next year anyways... (Dan, 68-71)

Dan appeared resigned to the fact that he has had to rely on himself to generate additional support for his sexual minority peers. The words *"there wasn't any support really"* (Dan, 69) outlined that some of sexually minoritised YP may have to navigate difficult experiences independently without additional support from school. Therefore, the drive for change from students like Dan seems to have had a big impact for others in the community.

Ben also discussed the support group that he and his peers lead in his school:

...like at my school erm...we do have a er inclusion and equality club but that is something that has been brought up by the students and formed by students...we have to take the initiative...it's never really something that the school does... (Ben, 29-32)

Like Dan, Ben seemed frustrated by the lack of additional support provided by his school. The line *"we have to take the initiative"* (Ben, 31) appeared to outline that Ben has felt unable to rely on his school to offer the additional support he has required as a sexually minoritised YP. Such frustration seems to have driven him to make change and support other YP like himself.

Dan's drive to create positive change for his community seemed partially driven by his hope in the younger generation to be receptive to these changes. During his interview he described the difficulties he has faced as a member of a sexual minority and how educating others had been hard due to lack of reciprocity and willingness to understand. He contrasted this with younger generations in his school and how he felt that they would be more receptive to this:

Erm I think...(sigh) it's difficult because when-even when we did it about opposite sex relationships people were very like immature and stuff and so I think er ...so I don't think it really would have done much I think now it's good that they have it because...I mentor a lot of younger years and erm...they're all so like just open they just-it's just normal to them and it just wasn't when I was younger... (Dan, 52-58)

Dan seemed to place hope in younger generations and their openness to the LGBTQ+ community. The use of the words *“it’s just normal to them”* (Dan, 57) appeared to highlight that his positive feelings regarding the future for sexually minoritised people.

4.7 Summary of the Current Findings

Throughout the interviews participants described a *“Journey to Discovering an Identity”*. Each YP outlined their journeys, involving the freedom to explore and express their identities, alongside the barriers they have faced. Across these narratives, the participants had to advocate for themselves to overcome these barriers and to express themselves. A significant contribution to each YP’s experience in their education setting seemed to be the support gained from their communities. The participants described *“Building a Supportive Community”* and how this support came from different sources. Whilst the participants explored the positives of having a supportive community, they also described circumstances during which *“Support from Your Education Setting Falls Short”*. They highlighted the difficulties they had experienced attending a setting that lacks in appropriate support for sexually minoritised YP. Three YP explored the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic and the lack of support they received from their education settings during and following this period. The participants explored *“The Realities of Belonging to a Sexual Minority in the Current Cultural and Political Context.”* They outlined the fear they have experienced around being open about their identity in their education settings, and their experiences of discrimination. Finally, the participants described the positive support available to them and the *“Impact of Positive Support from Your Education Setting”*. Two participants highlighted the positive experiences of support in their college settings in comparison to their secondary school. The positive support for gender identity was discussed alongside the drive to create positive change for the LGBTQ+ community.

4.7.1 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the researcher’s Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the experiences of four sexually minoritised YP. In Chapter 5, the researcher will discuss the impact of these findings in relation to the literature.

Chapter 5 – Discussion

5.1 Introduction

The current research aimed to explore the experiences of sexual minority pupils in educational provision in 2022. Recent research exploring the experiences of LGBTQ+ YP is limited and predominantly focuses upon the experiences of gender diverse YP. The researcher felt that exploration in this area would be relevant given the rapidly changing social and political landscape in England and the recent COVID 19 pandemic, with early research highlighting some negative experiences for LGBTQ+ YP following this period. The research hoped to build upon the foundations of the current literature, with the intention of promoting a clearer understanding of these experiences to develop avenues for support and to provide a platform for further discussion in this area.

The following chapter will endeavour to explore the five GETs which emerged following the interpretative phenomenological analysis of four YP's accounts of their experiences of belonging to a sexual minority in their education settings. This discussion acknowledged the double hermeneutic cycle involved in interpreting the experiences of these participants, with the findings reflecting the researcher's own interpretation of the YP's interpretation of their experiences. These findings will be discussed in relation to the current literature and the initial research question:

What are the lived experiences of Sexual Minority pupils in educational provision in 2022?

The discussion will be followed by the conclusions drawn from the study, alongside a critique of the research, examining the challenges and limitations of the process. Finally, the chapter will consider the implications of the research for key stakeholders, and avenues for future research in this area.

5.2 The Journey to Discovering an Identity

A key theme which emerged from the participants' narratives was the individual journeys YP experience in education, to discover their identities and to express these freely. For each participant, the freedom to explore their identities, with support from friends and their communities online, allowed them to develop a greater understanding of themselves during their time in education. This reflected a range of studies which highlight the importance of researching information around the LGBTQ+ community and meeting others in the community to make an informed decision about your identity (McGowan et al., 2022; Freedman, 2019). Due to the ever-evolving labels associated with the LGBTQ+ umbrella, it can be difficult to find your true identity and to generate the language required

to express this to others (McGowan et al., 2014). Therefore, having access to resources to support this process, often within their education settings, seems vital in allowing these YP to express themselves openly.

Alongside this, each participant noted the increasing fluidity of sexuality and gender expression and the influence this has had on their journeys to finding themselves. This echoed research which outlines that YP seem to have greater freedom to explore the wide range of labels assigned to describe their gender identity or sexual orientation (Lewis & Gossett, 2008). YP are also beginning to express more fluid identities which may not conform to the heteronormative expectations of social roles and norms (Abes & Kasch, 2007). This is in line with figures from the Office for National Statistics (2020) which demonstrate the growth of the LGBTQ+ community in the UK, particularly within the 16-25 age bracket. This appears to be due to LGBTQ+ YP becoming more comfortable exploring and expressing their identities, leading to increased visibility (Bowskill, 2017; Lewis & Gossett, 2008).

Despite greater visibility of the LGBTQ+ community and changing global attitudes (Ayoub & Garretson, 2017), the participants articulated the complexity of their individual journeys and the barriers they were faced with when expressing themselves. Research highlights the social risk of expressing your identity and the caution that LGBTQ+ people take when coming out to others (Freedman, 2019; Bower-Brown et al., 2020; Connor & Atkinson, 2022; McGowan et al., 2022). The views of others, like parents and peers, seem to greatly impact how comfortable YP feel expressing their identities (Freedman, 2019; Morris et al., 2014). Some YP may feel dismissed, or invalidated by the reactions of others (Freedman, 2019) and other YP may feel wary that their identity will be spread to others without their consent, which can readily occur in a school environment (Morris et al., 2014). The COVID 19 pandemic seemed to provide a safe space for this exploration for some YP without the pressure to come out to peers in school (Paechter et al., 2021; Fish et al., 2020).

When discussing barriers to openly express their identities, the participants highlighted the restrictions in their education settings, particularly regarding uniform. Research highlights that the social norms of gender and sexuality are especially prominent for YP in education settings in the England, where uniforms are often mandatory (Frohard-Dourlent, 2016). These social expectations can prevent the self-expression of LGBTQ+ YP, forcing them to hide their identities due to the risk of sanctions from their education setting (Berry, 2018). Studies suggest that LGBTQ+ YP often have to hide who they are at school to make their differences less visible and to conform to societal rules (Yoshino, 2007). According to The Gay, Lesbian, Straight, Education Network (GLSEN) 2013 National

School Climate Survey conducted in the U.S., 15.5% of the 7,898 students (aged between 13 and 21) reported that they had been prevented from wearing clothing or items supporting LGBT issues.

In the U.K. the DfE (2014) has outlined that school uniforms must not discriminate against gender diverse YP. However, in The School Report by Stonewall (Bradlow et al., 2017), out of a sample of 3,700 LGBT YP, one in five transgender YP said they cannot wear clothes and uniform in line with their gender identity at school. Additionally, it seems that some education settings continue to restrict self-expression amongst sexually minoritised pupils.

Whilst the participants recognised the barriers they have faced during their journeys; they also highlighted the importance of being their own best advocates and protecting themselves from the negative experiences in their education settings. This is in line with research by Bower-Brown et al. (2020), within which gender diverse YP highlighted the importance of minimising the impact of their negative experiences on themselves. For example, by perceiving a disparity between their true self and the self that they express to others, or through denying the effect negative experiences.

Participants also appeared to make light of situations they have endured through the use of humour as a coping strategy. Research suggests that those in the LGBTQ+ community often use humour as a way of navigating difficult situations (Craig et al., 2018; Christman, 2012). Findings reported by Abel (2002) indicated that adolescents who have a greater sense of humour report lower levels of stress and anxiety, alongside greater use of positive appraisal and problem-solving coping strategies. Therefore, according to Craig et al. (2018), humour could be particularly useful for LGBTQ+ YP to help buffer the effects of cumulative stress.

These findings add to the understanding that sexually minoritised YP will experience a journey to finding and expressing their identities. This outlines the importance of acceptance from others due to these YP often having to advocate for themselves to feel comfortable to express themselves in their education settings.

5.3 Building a Supportive Community

The importance of community was highlighted throughout the interviews. A range of studies have indicated the importance of having a supportive group of peers when navigating the journey to finding your identity and when expressing yourself (Freedman, 2019; Bower-Brown et al., 2020).

The capacity to find and build your own community appears to be vital for many YP (Blakemore, 2008). The current data demonstrated that this seems to be an important protective factor for those who are part of a sexual minority. The participants discussed the support and acceptance they have gained from their peers and the positive impact this has had on their educational experiences. Studies suggest that this support can help to alleviate the negative impact of discriminatory behaviour in school (Freedman, 2019). Furthermore, Leonard's (2022) research highlighted the importance of gaining acceptance from peers and the positive impact this can have on a YP's wellbeing.

Research highlights the particular importance of seeking out other members of the LGBTQ+ community when building this support system (Bower-Brown et al., 2020). When surrounded by like-minded individuals with shared experiences, these YP often feel less isolated (Freedman, 2019). This can also help LGBTQ+ YP to feel more resilient and able to advocate for themselves (Singh et al., 2013).

The participants also touched upon the impact of being separated from their communities during the COVID 19 lockdowns. When sexually minoritised YP rely on their built communities for advice and support, having this taken away can impact their wellbeing. This supports the findings of the Just Like Us (2021) survey of 11–18-year-old LGBTQ+ YP, with 52% of these YP feeling lonely during the lockdown period due to being separated from their support systems.

The YP expressed the importance of building a community online to alleviate the impact of COVID 19 lockdowns. Research indicates that the internet has become a venue for YP to obtain support through a safe and accepting online community (Craig & McInroy, 2014; McDavitt et al., 2008). This online community can allow YP to express their identities anonymously prior to approaching others in their education settings (Craig & McInroy, 2014). Such avenues appear to be vital for YP who may experience discrimination in their education settings (Craig et al., 2018), and for those who experienced the COVID 19 lockdowns and the isolation from their communities.

The importance of supportive family members was raised by the current participants. This was discussed both from the perspective of YP who experienced positive support when coming out to their families, and from the perspective of a YP who experienced a negative reaction. For LGBT YP, gaining acceptance from family members can be crucial in promoting their wellbeing (Ryan et al., 2010). However, a great deal of research focuses on the negativity in relationships between sexually minoritised YP and their caregivers (Ryan et al., 2009; Rosario., 2009). Studies have found that the relationship between YP in sexual minorities and their parents can be challenged during the YP's

period of finding and expressing themselves (D'Augelli et al., 2005), which can have an impact on the mental health outcomes of these YP (Ryan et al., 2009). This also supports findings from the Just Like Us (2021) survey, which highlighted that 17% of the YP surveyed felt less able to express their identities to their families during the COVID 19 lockdowns due to receiving less support and acceptance in their home environments.

Following this, a study that examined the relationship between young adults in a sexual minority and their perceived family support, identified that these YP report lower levels of parental support than heterosexual young adults (Needham & Austin, 2010). However, they also found that, whilst LGB adults have a higher likelihood of elevated depressive symptomology and suicidality, the presence of parental support either partially or fully mediates these associations (Needham & Austin, 2010). Whilst one YP in the current research expressed the difficulties they experienced with their family not being accepting of their identity, the majority of the YP highlighted the support they gained from their family members and the positive impact this has had on their experiences. This could indicate the increasing acceptance for LGBTQ+ people in society and the positive impact this can have on these YP feeling accepted by others.

The current findings add to the knowledge regarding the importance of community for sexually minoritised YP. The participants sought support, advice and acceptance from like-minded individuals, both in person and online. This also highlights the importance of gaining acceptance from your family to alleviate some of the negative effects of discrimination.

5.4 When Support from Your Education Setting Falls Short

A key theme which arose across the interviews was the lack of appropriate support and inclusive practice in place for those in a sexual minority in some education settings. The YP outlined that any additional measures in place in school to support them were often not accessible or not specific to their needs as a member of a sexual minority, sometimes appearing tokenistic.

Studies have outlined the lack of inclusive practice in education settings for those in the LGBTQ+ community (Davidson, 2020), creating an environment that can feel unsafe and hostile (Day et al., 2018). LGBTQ+ YP are at greater risk of psychological stress and suicidality, due to the increased potential for bullying and victimisation in school (Madireddy & Madireddy, 2020). It is therefore key for education settings to implement additional support for these YP to mitigate these risks. Research

has demonstrated the importance of supportive school-level initiatives, such as creating safe spaces, in protecting LGBTQ+ YP against bullying and victimisation (Harris et al., 2021).

Poor knowledge and understanding of the LGBTQ+ community by other students in education settings was highlighted by the participants as contributing to their experiences of bullying. The YP outlined that they have been victimised by peers who are misinformed about the LGBTQ+ community. Such experiences can lead to LGBTQ+ YP feeling that they are responsible for educating their peers, to prevent bullying and discrimination, which can add to their cumulative stressors (Bower-Brown et al., 2020). Transgender participants in McGowan et al.'s (2022) research outlined that schools should educate their pupils about sexual and gender diverse individuals to increase acceptance and validation.

The participants explored their experiences of discrimination and the lack of consequences for such actions. They described feeling isolated and reliant on themselves and their peers to protect them from this discrimination. Such findings are in line with research by Paechter et al. (2021) who found that the transgender YP in their study experienced poor responses to bullying in school from teachers who lacked the knowledge and understanding to offer appropriate consequences and support. Despite legislation in place in schools to prevent discrimination and promote equality for YP with the protected characteristics outlined in the Equality Act (2010), and statutory guidance outlining the requirement for schools to have a behaviour policy to prevent prejudice-based and discriminatory bullying (DfE, 2022), it seems that some education settings lack such frameworks for responding to discrimination or perhaps fail to adhere to these frameworks.

Another potential reason for the lack of appropriate consequences for discrimination in schools is the lack of education and understanding of sexual minorities amongst school staff. The participants described feeling dismissed by staff members in their education settings, leading to them being placed in uncomfortable situations and not feeling protected from bullying. One YP outlined that his teacher had not provided support when he felt victimised as she felt that she did not have enough understanding to avoid causing him offense. Studies have highlighted that LGBTQ+ YP often experience the impact of heteronormativity in school, with some members of school staff lacking an understanding of their identities and unintentionally invalidating these identities (McGowan et al., 2022; Bower-Brown et al., 2020).

Jones et al. (2016) outlined the influential position that school staff are in to ameliorate the negative experiences of LGBTQ+ YP, especially through educating others in school. However, previous research has suggested that teachers feel under-supported to explore issues regarding gender diversity and sexuality (Formby, 2013; White et al., 2018). This echoes views from participants in the current study who indicated that input regarding sexuality should be provided by staff who are appropriately trained and have knowledge of this area. According to Connor and Atkinson (2022), nurturing such knowledge and understanding amongst school staff is vital for LGBTQ+ YP to feel accepted and seen in education.

The lack of support provided by school staff and the limited knowledge and understanding in some education settings is in line with research by McGowan et al. (2022). They outlined the theme of 'school apathy' which arose when exploring the views of transgender YP in secondary schools. They found that some school staff can seem apathetic when faced with implementing inclusive practices for LGBTQ+ YP. At times, this may lead to staff members offering support which could appear tokenistic, rather than carefully considered and properly implemented. This is in contrast to research which highlights the impact of positive support from school staff, including those who research LGBTQ+ issues to advocate for pupils (Leonard, 2022).

Due to the current research taking place following the changes to statutory guidance around the RSE curriculum from September 2020, making it a legal requirement for secondary school pupils in England to receive input around LGBT relationships (DfE, 2019), the researcher examined the potential impact of this introduction on sexually minoritised YP in education settings. Whilst the YP in the current research had their RSE input prior to this change, they each recognised the positive impact this would have had on their early secondary school experiences. The participants discussed the lack of input they received in school around same-sex relationships, causing them to struggle to understand such relationships and how to approach these safely. This supports findings from The School Report (Bradlow et al., 2017) which outlined that one in five LGBT pupils surveyed had been offered input around same-sex relationships, thus positively impacting their understanding of themselves and their sense of school belonging.

As discussed in section 5.3, the participants outlined the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic on their school experiences as part of a sexual minority. Alongside lack of access to their peers and typical support systems, they highlighted the lack of support provided by their education settings and the impact this had on their mental health during this time. The YP discussed the minimal support they

had received from school prior to COVID 19, and how the lockdown periods made this minimal support even harder to access. This echoes findings from the Just Like Us (2021) survey which outlined that 90% of LGBTQ+ YP felt that their mental health had been impacted by the lockdown period. Further to this, Fish et al. (2020) investigated the experiences of LGBTQ+ YP during COVID 19. Participants outlined the unique impact of COVID 19 on the mental health of LGBTQ+ youth, largely due to a lack of support at home and support services being over-run due to pandemic closures.

5.5 The Reality of Belonging to a Sexual Minority in the Current Context

During the interviews, participants described the reality of being open about their sexual identities in their education settings. They discussed their fears about expressing themselves due to prejudiced views and experiences of discrimination.

Despite research outlining the changing global attitudes towards sexuality and greater acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community (Ayoub & Garretson, 2017), studies have indicated that LGBTQ+ YP are at increased risk of experiencing victimisation in education due to their perceived differences from social norms (Ratcliff et al., 2022; Kann et al., 2018). The participants in the current study described the fear they have experienced when expressing themselves due to bullying in their settings or due to examples of extreme discrimination they have witnessed in the media. They outlined that sometimes the safest option has been to hide their identities to protect themselves. This reflects research which highlights the negative reactions YP can receive when they present differently from the perceived societal norm (Bower-Brown et al., 2020; Paechter et al., 2021).

The YP in the current research discussed the distress that these experiences have caused, leading them to feel unsafe in their education settings. This supports research which highlights that homophobic and transphobic bullying can result in significant psychological distress in LGB youths (Poteat & Espelage, 2007). Further to this, such challenges faced by these YP in their education settings can result in poor academic and health outcomes (Kosciw et al., 2016; Davidson, 2020).

This also echoes research relating to the minority stress model (Meyer, 2003) and how LGBTQ+ YP experience unique cumulative stressors, such as bullying and discrimination, leading to health disparities between heterosexual and cisgender individuals (Ratcliff et al., 2022). One YP discussed his difficulties with his mental health, which seemed to be worsened due to the hate crimes he had experienced at school. Research outlines that general psychological processes and stigma-related stress can interact, therefore mutually reinforcing one another (Hatzenbuehler, 2009). According to

Craig et al. (2018), such interactions will exacerbate LGBTQ+ YP's mental health difficulties through a psychosocial pathway from stigmatised identity to mental health disparities. When exposed to such cumulative stressors as a member of a sexual minority, these YP will require particular coping strategies and support (Miller & Major, 2000).

Research has highlighted that these experiences can result in LGBTQ+ YP demonstrating absenteeism, impacting their progress in school (Flowers & Buston, 2001; Bower-Brown et al., 2020). The YP in the current study highlighted that such discrimination has caused them to feel unsafe and anxious in their education settings, however they could rely on their support systems and self-advocacy to navigate these difficult times. This appeared to have protected them from any significant negative impacts of these experiences. However, it should be noted that, for some sexually minoritised YP, access to such support might not be available to them, putting them at greater risk of negative repercussions (Ryan et al., 2009; Fish et al., 2020)

Within participants' discussions around their fear of discrimination, a narrative that arose was the impact of exposure to alarming events in the media. This involved extreme incidents of discrimination targeting LGBTQ+ individuals, such as the 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando. Whilst the media can be seen as an avenue for LGBTQ+ YP to explore their identities and to access online communities (Fish et al., 2020), this can also expose these YP to terrifying events that are impacting the LGBTQ+ community both locally and globally. This exposure seems to impact these YP's feelings of safety in society, creating feelings of discomfort and unease. There is little research surrounding the impact of witnessing such events in the media on LGBTQ+ YP. However, one study outlined the higher perceived concerns related to safety within LGBTQ+ adults following the Pulse nightclub shooting (Stults et al., 2017). They found that these elevated safety concerns may exacerbate the minority stress burden, contributing to poor health outcomes amongst these individuals.

These findings highlight the importance of education settings maintaining an inclusive environment in which sexually minoritised YP feel able to express their identity without fear of the reactions of others. It seems that this would promote the wellbeing and overall health of these YP (Russell et al., 2016). It also seems that LGBTQ+ YP have much greater access to the media and discriminatory events occurring globally and this may be impacting their feelings of safety in their education settings.

5.6 The Impact of Positive Support from Your Education Setting

The final theme involved the importance of education settings demonstrating inclusive practice and providing positive support for sexually minoritised YP. Research has outlined the importance of maintaining a safe and inclusive education setting to protect against the detrimental impact of discrimination and the cumulative stressors that LGBTQ+ YP are predisposed to (Madireddy & Madireddy, 2020).

Two participants in the current research discussed the top-down initiatives in place in their colleges to encourage LGBTQ+ YP to feel included and to protect against bullying. Such protective factors seem to have encouraged these YP to feel valued as members of their colleges. One YP acknowledged the positive impact that this support has had on their college experience, including fewer instances of bullying in comparison to school. This is in line with research which highlights the importance of education settings implementing appropriate protective factors to allow LGBTQ+ YP to included, and to prevent instances of bullying and discrimination (Harris et al., 2021).

Both participants discussed the college-led support groups that had been introduced for LGBTQ+ YP to support inclusion. Introducing such safe spaces for these YP and having supportive school staff to encourage the implementation of inclusive practices can create a positive school climate for LGBTQ+ pupils (Greytak et al., 2013). Further studies have outlined the importance of education settings actively promoting inclusivity through support groups and whole-setting initiatives, allowing LGBTQ+ YP to feel that they are valued members of the community (Leonard, 2022).

Such examples of college-led initiatives can be contrasted with the lack of similar practices stipulated to be in place in school settings. Two YP who participated in the research were attending sixth form settings and they each discussed the lack of top-down approaches introduced by their schools to encourage inclusivity. As a result, these participants have had to advocate for themselves to generate support for LGBTQ+ YP in their school. For example, setting up student-led support groups to promote equality. This contrasts with the research outlined by Singh et al. (2013) who demonstrated that the presence of LGBTQ+ groups in schools can help improve the self-advocacy skills of YP who have access to them. They highlighted that this was due to these YP having access to more opportunities for such activism. However, the YP in the current research who have demonstrated self-advocacy are those who have not previously had access to LGBTQ+ support groups in their schools. Instead, they felt driven to advocate for their community due to not having access to these groups and the negative

repercussions this has had on their school experiences. As stated in Leonard's (2022, p.80) research, these actions seemed to be "born out of a sense of necessity" and driven by the lack of inclusive support from other sources. In contrast, the YP who had access to support groups in college felt comfortable in their settings and therefore perhaps did not have the incentive for self-advocacy.

In line with Morris et al.'s (2014) research, the YP who helped to set up these support groups in their schools highlighted their self-advocacy as an important contributor to facilitating change for others in the LGBTQ+ community. Similarly, Bower-Brown et al. (2020) highlighted that the drive to improve the school environment for LGBTQ+ YP through spreading awareness and activism is often motivated by these YP wanting to support others in their community.

A range of studies have demonstrated the positive impact of student-led support groups, particularly in the US where Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) have been introduced to improve the school climate for LGBTQ+ youth (Heck et al., 2013; Davidson, 2020). Such research shows that the presence of student-led support groups can help to increase the visibility of LGBTQ+ students and educate the schools on issues impacting this minority group, leading to more favourable outcomes for these students (Heck et al., 2013). UK studies have also highlighted the importance of such groups to provide a safe space to explore your identity and to generate activism in the school environment (Leonard, 2022, Connor & Atkinson, 2022).

A key reflection following the analysis of the current data was the recognition that there appeared to be a contrast between the support and inclusive practices for LGBTQ+ students in colleges in comparison to that offered in schools. As discussed above, the two YP attending sixth form settings in schools felt pushed to advocate for themselves and their communities through developing student-led support groups. The two YP attending colleges acknowledged the positive impact of the support and inclusive practices in their settings. Research documents that homophobia has been pervasive in school settings in particular, with sexual minority students being victims of anti-gay bullying and discrimination at school (McCormack, 2012). Studies suggest that "heterosexuality is privileged in school systems" (McCormack, 2012, p.4) and LGBT youth seem to be excluded as a result of such enforced heteronormativity (Allen, 2007). As a result, fewer LGBTQ+ youth continue into further and higher education (Fisher et al., 2008). Such attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community seem to be less rife in colleges, where views regarding homosexuality seem to be improving (Anderson, 2009; McCormack, 2012).

A similar narrative arose amongst the participants in Anderson et al.'s (2016) research exploring the experiences of bisexual girls in a sixth form college. They found that, whilst their research only explored sixth form experiences, some of the participants recognised the elevated rates of homophobia that exist in lower levels of schooling (Anderson et al., 2016; Palotta-Chiarolli, 2010). As a result of these findings, they hypothesised that the disparity between experiences in school and college for these YP could be partially attributable to their peer group developing an understanding of sexual diversity as they move through education. They also highlighted that it could represent "increased inclusivity that comes from students with educational aspirations" (Anderson et al., 2016, p. 17). Whilst the YP in the current research attended sixth form settings, they remain in the school environment alongside peers who may not have such developed views regarding sexual diversity and may be more likely to hold prejudiced views.

Whilst the YP discussed the varying support across college and school settings, a common theme which arose was the inclusive practices in place for gender diverse students. Three of the current participants were gender diverse as well as belonging to a sexual minority, therefore such initiatives have had a positive impact on their educational experiences. Studies focusing on encouraging a sense of school belonging for transgender YP have outlined the value of flexibility in school practices (Leonard, 2020). The YP in the current research discussed how their settings had been forthcoming with changes to their pronouns and deadnames on the school/college systems, helping them to feel comfortable and validated. Such findings echo McCormak's (2012) study in which a transgender YP received positive responses from their school following their social transition. The school were receptive to using their correct pronouns and name. Russell et al. (2018) found that being accepted and validated by an education setting can predict a decrease in depressive symptomology and suicidal ideation in transgender YP.

A narrative presented by one of the participants recognised the receptiveness of the younger generations to changes in the curriculum in favour of the LGBTQ+ community. It seems that the understanding and attitudes towards sexual minorities are changing, with younger generations demonstrating more open and inclusive views towards minority groups (Clements & Fields, 2014). This is in line with research by Ayoub and Garretson (2017) which indicates that global attitudes towards homosexuality are demonstrating rapid change, with YP at the forefront of these changes. Further studies have highlighted that YP are more open to inclusivity and to learning about minority groups (Herek et al., 2007). The more liberal attitudes of younger generations could help to continue

to drive these positive changes and increase inclusivity in education settings for those in a sexual minority.

These findings outline the importance of positive support for sexually minoritised YP in education settings. The disparity between that offered by sixth form settings and colleges was highlighted, suggesting the differing attitudes between YP in these settings towards the LGBTQ+ community. Such disparity can lead to self-advocacy and the drive to make changes for the LGBTQ+ community. Whilst the participants recognised these disparities, they each explored the inclusive practices their settings had displayed with regard to gender diverse YP. Finally, one YP highlighted the changing attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community, particularly in the younger generations.

5.7 Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Studies have demonstrated that there is a risk of treating the acronym 'LGBTQ+' as monolithic despite this label indicating groups with distinct identities (O'Sullivan & Phillips, 2019). The use of this umbrella term can create tensions due to the misconception that all of the groups within the acronym have similar experiences (Dargie et al., 2014). Even within subgroups of the LGBTQ+, experiences are distinct. For example, research has demonstrated differences across subgroups of sexual minorities (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual) in a variety of health domains and demographic categories, such as race and economic status (Mueller et al., 2015). Additionally, when conducting research within the LGBTQ+ community, it should be recognised that identities can intersect. Therefore, it can be difficult to discuss one subgroup in isolation.

The purpose of the current research was to explore the educational experiences of sexually minoritised YP. According to the APA (2021), the collective term 'sexual minority' refers to a group of people whose sexual identity differs from heterosexuality. Whilst recruiting YP to participate in the research, it was recognised that there is a great deal of fluidity regarding sexuality and gender, with those identifying as part of a sexual minority often also experiencing gender diversity. This is in line with research from the National Transgender Survey (Grant et al., 2011) which indicated the high level of overlap between identifying as transgender and as part of a sexual minority. Both sexual minority and gender diverse YP demonstrate mental health disparities and are at risk of experiencing bullying and discrimination. However, it should be recognised that, despite these populations often being grouped together, they are not homogenous and require different approaches to support.

The influence of sexual orientation on a YP's experience will vary greatly, not only based on their background but also on their gender identity. Therefore, you cannot isolate sexual identity and ignore the influence of gender on their experiences. Studies suggest conceptualising research involving LGBTQ+ individuals as part of an intersectionality framework (Parent et al., 2013). Intersectionality is a framework that outlines the complex ways in which multiple social identities can intersect with systems of privilege and oppression to shape an individual's lived experiences (Eisenberg et al., 2019). For example, how experiences of discrimination due to your identity can emphasise social inequalities and exacerbate health disparities. Therefore, YP who identify as part of a sexual minority and as gender diverse have simultaneous social membership in at least two marginalised groups, creating a complex, multifaceted identity structure. These multiple identities overlap in ways which can compound the effects of minority stress on these YP.

As a result, such YP are at risk from different forms of discrimination in society based on these distinct facets of their identity, creating a unique experience when coping with oppressive systems. Within the intersectionality framework, it would be expected that the experience of an individual who identifies as part of a sexual minority and as gender diverse would differ from those who solely identify as part of a sexual minority (Eisenberg et al., 2019). Three of the four participants who took part in the current study, identified as transgender or non-binary, alongside belonging to a sexual minority. Therefore, when interpreting the findings of this research, it should be noted that the participants were not solely a part of a sexual minority, and their experiences will have reflected this.

Subsequently, it should be noted that research has discussed the link between sexuality and gender, and how those in a sexual minority may not be gender diverse but may be gender role non-conforming. Research indicates a positive correlation between sexual orientation and gender role non-conformity (Bailey & Zucker, 1995). Furthermore, it has been highlighted that this intersection of sexual diversity and gender role non-conformity can produce additional emotional distress and harassment, due to the perceived violation of gender norms (Rieger & Savin-Williams, 2012; Gordon & Meyer, 2007). In the current research, when discussing his identity, Cam recognised his gender role non-conformity and how this has resulted in discrimination from others. Therefore, Cam's sexual identity and associated gender role non-conformity will have influenced his experiences in his education setting.

As a result of this discussion, it is important to highlight the participants who took part in the current research and how their intersectionality, including their gender identity and the gender role non-

conformity, will have influenced their experiences in their education settings. These YP belong to at least two minority groups and this intersectionality will have had a unique impact on their educational experiences. When exploring these experiences, there is a need to recognise the distinctiveness of those who identify as part of a sexual minority, whilst also acknowledging the overlap between gender and sexuality. Therefore, it may not be possible to separate the experiences of those who belong to a sexual minority and those who are gender diverse to answer the initial research question. Support and inclusive practices offered by educational settings should bear this intersectionality in mind and recognise all of the factors which might have an influence on a YP's experiences in education.

5.8 Methodological Review

5.8.1 Challenges and Limitations

The current research presented a number of challenges and limitations which should be considered in the context of the current findings and how these can be generalised to the wider population of sexually minoritized YP.

Firstly, the research had a small sample size, with four YP participating. Whilst IPA allows for small sample sizes, it was hoped to recruit more widely to generate a broader understanding of the experiences of these YP. However, a key challenge faced during this study was participant recruitment. As outlined in section 3.3.5, LGBTQ+ YP are a vulnerable population and therefore they require additional measures to ensure their safety (Fisher et al., 2008). Therefore, the recruitment process adhered to a number of ethical considerations. The first being that YP under the age of 16 were required to safely obtain parental consent prior to participation, which prevented two YP from taking part. As a result, all of the final participants were 16 or over and none of them required parental consent to take part.

A key implication of this is that the study might have struggled to reach participants with lower levels of family support or those who may not have come out to their families or peers. Research has demonstrated that LGBTQ+ YP who lack family support are more vulnerable to mental health problems (Ryan et al., 2010). Therefore, this study's findings cannot be generalised to this wider population of sexually minoritised YP.

This presented the additional barrier of not being able to recruit participants who had experience of the new RSE curriculum in schools. Therefore, the current participants were only able to provide their views on how they felt this would have influenced their experiences. Future research might be able to explore the impact of these curriculum changes on YP who have been exposed to this curriculum.

Due to the challenges faced recruiting YP for this research within the study timeframe, the researcher employed purposive sampling and opportunity sampling approaches. The participants who volunteered did so partly based on their confidence to be interviewed. Each YP spoke eloquently about their educational experiences and how their sexual identity shaped these experiences. Whilst these narratives were insightful, it should be recognised that YP who are vocal and able to advocate for themselves will often be the voices heard across similar research. During their interview, Ash acknowledged that another sexually minoritised YP who may not be as confident as them could struggle in their college setting. Therefore, the results of this research cannot be generalised to all sexually minoritised YP and may be biased towards those who actively engage in self-advocacy.

The sample was also limited to participants who identified as male or as non-binary, and no participants who identify as female took part. Due to the potential disparities in needs between sexually diverse YP who identify as female and as male, these findings may not apply to females who identify as part of a sexual minority. For example, gender non-conformity has been more negatively linked with well-being in sexually minoritised males in comparison to females (Rieger & Savin-Williams, 2012).

As discussed in section 5.6, it should be acknowledged that aspects of the participants' identities other than being part of a sexual minority, will also have had an influence on their experiences. The current participants self-identified as being gender-diverse or gender role non-conforming, therefore their experiences will have been influenced by these factors. The study also did not explore any further oppressions which might have impacted these YP in education, such as ableism and racism (Gill-Peterson, 2018).

Through employing IPA as a methodological approach to exploring the narratives of the YP in the current research, it was possible to generate a greater understanding of their lived experiences and their thoughts on inclusivity in their education settings. Whilst IPA allowed for this in-depth exploration, it also presented limitations in relation to its reliance upon the researcher's own subjective interpretation of the data, as described in section 3.3.2.

Due to this small sample size and the above limitations, the current findings might not generalise to the experiences of other sexually minoritised YP. However, the positives of the research should also be addressed when reviewing the current methodology.

5.8.2 Strengths of the Current Research

Despite these challenges and limitations, the study also presented a number of positives that should be acknowledged when reviewing the strength of the current evidence.

A key strength of the current research was the YP who participated and who offered insights into their experiences. Their participation in the study enabled a unique insight into the voices of sexually minoritised YP, whose voices are invaluable in informing the practice of staff in education settings and EPs. Sexually minoritised YP can be classed as a 'hard to reach' group (Sullivan & Losberg, 2013), therefore the opportunity to interview these YP was significant and offered the opportunity to gain new insights about their experiences that may not have been accessed in previous research.

The approach to data collection should also be acknowledged as a strength of the current research. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed for the collection of detailed and rich data (Smith et al., 2022). The YP could speak openly which encouraged an intimate focus on their personal experiences. This led the YP to discuss a range of topics that influenced their experiences in their education settings, providing unique insights. The researcher could modify their questions based on the participant responses, encouraging richer responses. One YP highlighted that they were grateful for the opportunity to discuss their school experiences in such depth and to have their voice heard. The chance to speak openly, free from concerns of judgement and prejudice, allowed this YP to explore their experiences and feel listened to.

Finally, the method utilised by the researcher for the current study was well detailed, suggesting the strong replicability and confirmability of the study findings. The approach to IPA was clearly documented, including a discussion of the process of the analysis and evaluation of the data. Additionally, the evaluation of the quality and validity of the current research in relation to Yardley's (2000) four broad principles, was clearly outlined in section 3.3.4.

Therefore, despite the challenges and limitations of the current research, this study helped to illuminate the educational experiences of a group of sexually minoritised YP. The research allowed access to unique voices, providing a platform to support positive change within education settings.

5.9 Conclusions

The aim of this research was to explore the educational experiences of sexually minoritised YP, given the rapidly changing social and political landscape in England regarding LGBTQ+ matters. Through discussions with these YP, a number of themes arose, including the support they generate for themselves in their settings, the positive support and inclusive practices offered in some settings, and the areas where support and inclusive practice could be improved.

The research outlined how each YP seems to experience a journey to discovering their identity, receiving a variety of support, and facing barriers along the way. Such journeys appear to reflect the changing landscape for those in a sexual minority and the increasingly varied ways in which sexuality can be expressed. The YP recognised the value of their friendships in their education settings to support this journey. They also outlined the barriers they faced whilst exploring and expressing their identities in their education settings. Whilst facing such barriers, it was highlighted that these YP often have to be their own best advocates.

In relation to the support sexually minoritised YP receive, it appears that the most prominent support comes in the form of friendships and community. The impact of the COVID 19 pandemic was discussed in relation to the isolation the participants felt when separated from their support networks. Although, this period of time seemed to emphasise the value of social media and how these communities are increasingly present online. The YP also explored the value of having a supportive family, with this often acting as a protective factor against negative outcomes.

In contrast to these depictions of support and acceptance, the participants outlined the impact of the lack of support from their education settings. They relayed how their education settings have felt unsafe at times, often due to the lack of knowledge and understanding held by their peers and members of school staff regarding LGBTQ+ issues. Sexually minoritised YP are prone to bullying and discrimination, resulting from misinformation and prejudiced views. An issue that arose from these narratives was the idea that some settings lack appropriate behaviour policies regarding consequences for discrimination, with such circumstances occurring repeatedly as a result of this. The participants recognised that, whilst attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community seem to be changing, sexually minoritised YP continue to live in fear due to experiences of discrimination.

Finally, the YP highlighted the value of positive support and inclusive practice in their settings. Their narratives presented the contrast between support in sixth form settings and colleges, alongside the

inclusive practices for gender diverse YP. The participants also recognised the value of self-advocacy and how changes they make within their settings can have a lasting impact on their own experiences and the experiences of others in their community.

This research has highlighted the educational experiences of sexually minoritised YP. Until now, no current research has exclusively explored the educational experiences of this group of YP, particularly following the COVID 19 pandemic and the rapidly changing social and political context. Despite reports of improvements in inclusive practices in schools regarding the LGBTQ+ community and research demonstrating reductions in prejudicial views, the participants outlined the barriers they have faced in their settings regarding expressing themselves and in relation to the lack of support they have received. They highlighted the ways in which education settings could provide support and demonstrate inclusivity, which would help them to feel comfortable and safe. This included educating their teachers and their peers to increase understanding and reduce misinformation. Additionally, they emphasised the importance of appropriate consequences for discrimination. It is hoped that these findings will provide those working with sexually minoritised YP guidance in recognising the barriers faced by this population, and ways forward in offering support and inclusive practices to encourage these YP to feel seen and heard.

5.9.1 Implications of the Current Research

The implications of this study can be recognised for educational settings, such as sixth forms and colleges, alongside EPs and their practice. The research suggests that inclusive practice for those belonging to a sexual minority may be lacking, particularly in some sixth form settings. Some pupils appear to feel that their voices are not heard and the unique issues they face are not taken seriously by the staff in their settings.

Two participants in the current research outlined that lack of top-down support they have received from their school regarding inclusivity for sexual minorities. Therefore, it seems important for education settings to recognise the value of whole-school top-down approaches to encourage these YP to feel accepted in their settings. The participants highlighted the importance of teachers and other members of staff in their settings to understand the range of issues facing sexual minorities and how to help these students feel supported throughout their educational journeys. According to Jones et al. (2016), school staff are in influential positions to mitigate instances of discrimination and to

ensure that sexually minoritised YP feel safe in school. However, many staff members feel uncomfortable to provide this support due to a lack of knowledge (Formby et al., 2013).

Whilst the participants reported some positive inclusive practice for gender diverse students, it seems significant to note that there does not seem to be any specific support or inclusive practice regarding those in a sexual minority. The participants outlined the value of having someone they could talk to in their education settings, who understands their identity and how to support them. It seems that a helpful starting point might be to provide training for school staff specifically regarding those in sexual minorities and the unique issues they face. It might be of value to designate a member of staff as an LGBTQ+ ally whom YP are aware they can approach if they are facing difficulties or struggling to understand their identity.

Additionally, it appears that some school staff might be unclear about how to approach instances of discrimination against sexually minoritised YP. Therefore, the findings highlight the importance of the development and implementation of appropriate behaviour policies across these settings to support the safeguarding of these YP (Greytak et al., 2013). Whilst such policies are likely to exist in such environments based on the 'Keeping Children Safe in Education' guidance (DfE, 2022), it will be important to ensure that staff are supported to become awareness of these so that they are acted upon suitably.

Such implications present a role for EPs in relation to supporting education settings to upskill their staff and to highlight to them current research around these issues. EPs are also in a good position to support the development and implementation of such behaviour policies and practices (Lemkin, 2012). They can work collaboratively with education settings to devise implementation plans, ensuring that such policies are taken seriously and disseminated to all staff.

There is no current guidance from the Association of Educational Psychologists (AEP) or the Division of Educational and Child Psychology (DECP) about working with members of the LGBTQ+ community. The current research outlines what might be useful to include in such guidance which could be valuable in informing EP practice.

The study has highlighted the value sexually minoritised YP place on their identities and having others respect these. They indicated the impact of barriers to being able to express themselves openly, including others questioning their identities. The participants also recognised the varied ways in which sexuality can be felt and expressed, with some professionals in their education settings

struggling to recognise certain identities. Therefore, it seems important for guidance informing EP practice with LGBTQ+ YP to include information about the LGBTQ+ community and the varied ways in which these identities can be expressed. This could help such YP to feel comfortable with the professionals working with them and minimise their concerns around having to explain themselves.

One YP reflected upon the difficulties they have experienced with expressing their identity to their parents. It seems that some sexually minoritised YP might not have a supportive home environment and may be driven keep their identities private when at home. Therefore, it seems important for guidance for EPs to include information on how to approach such circumstances, including keeping information confidential when appropriate.

5.9.2 Areas for Future Research

The current research reflects the views of four YP who identify as part of a sexual minority. It demonstrates that, whilst this population can be hard to reach, they are driven to discuss their experiences and are eager to have their voices heard. Such contributions are invaluable in understanding the lived experiences of these minority groups and in exploring the support and practices in education settings which these YP feel they would benefit from. Therefore, it will be important to continue to access these voices and to generate positive change for sexually minoritised YP.

This research also recognises the importance of taking an intersectional approach to analysis when working with LGBTQ+ YP. Given the overlap between sexuality and gender, and that sexually minoritised YP may also identify as gender-diverse and gender role non-conforming, it is vital to recognise that they will likely be affected by multiple oppressions. Therefore, future research in this area should take an intersectional approach to generate an understanding of how best to support LGBTQ+ YP.

5.9.3 Final Conclusion

To conclude, by employing IPA to explore the lived experiences of sexually minoritised YP in education settings in 2022, this research has been able to contribute a detailed analysis to the existing body of research around LGBTQ+ YP. The research has provided a platform for the voices of these YP to be heard and listened to by educational professionals, perhaps allowing for such experiences to contribute to changes to policy and guidance for those who work with sexually minoritised YP.

Through carrying out this research, it is hoped that a greater understanding of sexually minoritised YP are experiencing school and college in the current social and political context of England.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Reasons for final exclusion from the systematic review

1. Carless, Douglas, Milnes & Turner-Moore (2020) “Everyone knows me as the weird kid”: Being bisexual, genderfluid and fifteen”

Paper contained a performance text and a lack of interpretation of lived experiences.

2. Horton (2022) Gender minority stress in education: Protecting trans children’s mental health in UK schools.

Data contained views of parents and children which were reported and analysed together. This made it difficult to distinguish between the views and experiences of parents and children.

3. White, Magrath and Thomas (2018) The experiences of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual students and staff at a Further Education college in South East England.

Paper focussed on the experiences of young people and staff in college. It also contained data from heterosexual peers. This data was analysed together making it difficult to distinguish the views of the LGB young people.

4. Bragg, Renold, Ringrose and Jackson (2018) ‘More than boy, girl, male, female’: exploring young people’s views on gender diversity within and beyond school contexts.

Study explores how young people experience gender rather than the lived experiences of gender diverse young people.

5. Formby (2013) Understanding and responding to homophobia and bullying: contrasting staff and young people’s views within community settings in England

Data gathers a range of perspectives and contains the views of young people and stakeholders (teachers and youth service workers). This makes the views of the young people difficult to distinguish. The study also examines homophobia and bullying within a wider community context rather than solely in schools.

6. Lemkin (2012) How schools and youth provision support the wellbeing of all young people and lesbian, gay and bisexual young people in particular

Study involves the exploration of pupil and staff views making the views of young people difficult to distinguish at analysis.

Appendix B – Framework for using the CASP



Paper for appraisal and reference:

Section A: Are the results valid?

1. Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
Can't Tell	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

- HINT: Consider
- what was the goal of the research
 - why it was thought important
 - its relevance

Comments:

2. Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
Can't Tell	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

- HINT: Consider
- If the research seeks to interpret or illuminate the actions and/or subjective experiences of research participants
 - Is qualitative research the right methodology for addressing the research goal

Comments:

Is it worth continuing?

3. Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
Can't Tell	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

- HINT: Consider
- if the researcher has justified the research design (e.g. have they discussed how they decided which method to use)

Comments:

4. Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
Can't Tell	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

HINT: Consider

- If the researcher has explained how the participants were selected
- If they explained why the participants they selected were the most appropriate to provide access to the type of knowledge sought by the study
 - If there are any discussions around recruitment (e.g. why some people chose not to take part)

Comments:

5. Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
Can't Tell	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

HINT: Consider

- If the setting for the data collection was justified
- If it is clear how data were collected (e.g. focus group, semi-structured interview etc.)
- If the researcher has justified the methods chosen
 - If the researcher has made the methods explicit (e.g. for interview method, is there an indication of how interviews are conducted, or did they use a topic guide)
 - If methods were modified during the study. If so, has the researcher explained how and why
 - If the form of data is clear (e.g. tape recordings, video material, notes etc.)
 - If the researcher has discussed saturation of data

Comments:

6. Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
Can't Tell	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

- HINT: Consider
- If the researcher critically examined their own role, potential bias and influence during (a) formulation of the research questions (b) data collection, including sample recruitment and choice of location
 - How the researcher responded to events during the study and whether they considered the implications of any changes in the research design

Comments:

Section 8: What are the results?

7. Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
Can't Tell	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

- HINT: Consider
- If there are sufficient details of how the research was explained to participants for the reader to assess whether ethical standards were maintained
 - If the researcher has discussed issues raised by the study (e.g. issues around informed consent or confidentiality or how they have handled the effects of the study on the participants during and after the study)
 - If approval has been sought from the ethics committee

Comments:

8. Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
Can't Tell	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

HINT: Consider

- If there is an in-depth description of the analysis process
- If thematic analysis is used. If so, is it clear how the categories/themes were derived from the data
- Whether the researcher explains how the data presented were selected from the original sample to demonstrate the analysis process
- If sufficient data are presented to support the findings
 - To what extent contradictory data are taken into account
- Whether the researcher critically examined their own role, potential bias and influence during analysis and selection of data for presentation

Comments:

9. Is there a clear statement of findings?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
Can't Tell	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

HINT: Consider whether

- If the findings are explicit
- If there is adequate discussion of the evidence both for and against the researcher's arguments
- If the researcher has discussed the credibility of their findings (e.g. triangulation, respondent validation, more than one analyst)
- If the findings are discussed in relation to the original research question

Comments:

Section C: Will the results help locally?

10. How valuable is the research?

HINT: Consider

- If the researcher discusses the contribution the study makes to existing knowledge or understanding (e.g. do they consider the findings in relation to current practice or policy, or relevant research-based literature)
- If they identify new areas where research is necessary
- If the researchers have discussed whether or how the findings can be transferred to other populations or considered other ways the research may be used

Comments:

Appendix C: CASP Outcomes for Studies in the Systematic Literature Review

Key: 3=yes, 2=can't tell, 1=no

Authors	Connor & Atkinson (2022)	Bower-Brown et al. (2020)	Freedman (2019)	Leonard (2022)	McGowan et al. (2022)	Morris et al. (2014)	Paechter et al. (2021)
1. Clear statement of research aims?	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
2. Appropriate qualitative methodology?	3	2	3	3	3	3	3
3. Appropriate research design?	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
4. Appropriate recruitment strategy?	3	2	3	3	3	3	3
5. Data collection addresses research issue?	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
6. Consideration of relationship?	3	1	3	3	2	2	3
7. Ethical issues considered?	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
8. Data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
9. Clear statement of findings?	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
10. Value of research?	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
Total Score	30	27	30	30	29	29	30

Appendix D: Weight of Evidence Assessments for each individual study in the Systematic Literature Review

Connor & Atkinson (2022)

Weight of Evidence	Result	Explanation
A	High	Clear reports of data collection and analysis process Semi-structured interviews allowed for rich detail.
B	High	Conducted privately so freedom to explore experiences. Inductive approach taken to analysis based on themes from interviews.
C	Medium	Study conducted in England. Focus on LGBTQ+ participant voices. Retrospective study of experiences in education from young adult.
D	High	Combination of ratings

Bower-Brown et al. (2020)

Weight of Evidence	Result	Explanation
A	Medium-High	Clear reports of data collection and analysis. Some limitation in details provided including consideration of relationship. Uncertainty around recruitment.
B	Medium-High	Open-ended responses to large-scale survey questions analysed through thematic analysis. Inductive approach.
C	High	Study conducted in England. Focus on LGBTQ+ young people's experiences in school.
D	Medium-High	Combination of ratings

Freedman (2019)

Weight of Evidence	Result	Explanation
A	High	Clear process of data collection and approach to analysis. Consideration of ethical issues and the value of the research. Results grounded in data.
B	High	Semi-structured interviews. Analysed through an inductive approach.
C	Medium	Study conducted in England with LGBTQ+ young people. Also contained voices of parents.
D	Medium-High	Combination of ratings

Leonard (2022)

Weight of Evidence	Result	Explanation
A	High	Clear recruitment, data collection and analysis. Analysis grounded in participant data.

B	High	Semi-structured interviews in private spaces with young people comfortable to explore experiences. Analysed through an inductive approach.
C	High	Study conducted in England with Trans young people only. School experiences.
D	High	Combination of ratings

McGowan et al. (2022)

Weight of Evidence	Result	Explanation
A	Medium-High	Clear description of data collection and appropriate recruitment strategy. Unclear of relationship.
B	High	Semi-structured interviews conducted with open-ended questions. Reflexive thematic analysis allowing for an inductive approach.
C	High	Conducted in England. Participants were trans secondary pupils only.
D	High	Combination of ratings

Morris et al. (2014)

Weight of Evidence	Result	Explanation
A	Medium-High	Clear description of data collection and appropriate recruitment strategy. Unclear of relationship.
B	High	In-depth interviews allowing for rich exploration of experiences. Inductive approach to analysis.
C	Medium	Study conducted in England, two participants from Wales and Scotland (different education system). Bisexual pupils only.
D	Medium-High	Combination of ratings

Paechter et al. (2021)

Weight of Evidence	Result	Explanation
A	High	Clear process of data collection and analysis. Appropriate strategy for recruitment and variation of participants.
B	Medium	Interviews conducted during lockdown (perhaps impacting openness and rapport). Semi-structured interviews. Inductive approach to analysis.
C	High	Study in England. Gender diverse young people only.
D	Medium-High	Combination of ratings

Appendix E: Examples of the approach taken to the meta-ethnography, including phases 4,5 and 6.

Phase 4 of the meta-analysis began with the researcher outlining the key metaphors, phrases, ideas, and concepts of the included studies based on the list of findings produced during phase 3. The researcher then began to juxtapose these findings through displaying the commonalities and differences between these concepts. The approach taken has been outlined in the image below.

This image represents an example of the process the researcher adopted to explore the similarities and differences between the included studies. Lists of the key metaphors, phrases, ideas, and concepts were written by hand alongside each other so that they could be easily compared. This also allowed the initial relationships between the concepts in the different studies to be indicated through drawing arrows and lines (shown in black).

Connor & Atkinson (2022)	Bower-Brown et al (2020)	Freedman (2019)	Leonard (2022)	McGowan et al (2022)	Paechter et al (2021)	Mom's et al (2014)
Importance of others having knowledge & understanding (of intersexuality).	Pressure to exist within gender binary... Poor understanding.	Complexities of gender identity and navigating trans.	Language used - feeling respected and accepted.	Acceptance of identity - feeling valid.	Acceptance of peers and family	Positive change → acceptance and greater understanding
Lack of awareness of intersex - poor inclusion.	Experiencing discrimination (lack of awareness).	Fear of not being accepted - lack of knowledge (awareness), poor awareness	Acceptance value of individual teacher support - knowledge.	Community in which you can express yourself and feel open.	↳ important protective factors	Acceptance
Protective factors - support groups	Importance of safe spaces and consistent support.	Importance of support networks of support	Positive staff support.	Education around trans issues in schools - spreading awareness.	Inclusion in schools - key staff members	Importance of inclusion.
Counselling Awareness	Teacher support and understanding (variable).	Educating others about trans issues and inclusive practice.	Community support - peers and families.	key staff member support - feel safe and autonomous.	Openness w/ identity - ability to express this	Importance of staff support and understanding
Feeling accepted.	Support from staff.	Acceptance from others.	Self-advocacy - empowering self and others to make positive change.	Fear of rejection and experiencing hetero/cisnormativity	Bullying - fear of expression, discrimination	Support groups in place.
Gender curriculum for inclusion	Importance of control over identity		Gendered systems.		Gendered school policies - not inclusive.	Bullying and lack of understanding.

The second-order and third-order interpretations for the systematic review

This following table displays the themes identified in the seven individual studies that contributed to the current systematic review, these are colour-coded to display how they translate into the second-order and third-order interpretations:

Connor & Atkinson (2022)	Bower-Brown et al. (2020)	Freedman (2019)	Leonard (2022)	McGowan et al. (2022)	Morris et al. (2014)	Paechter et al. (2021)
Knowledge and understanding	Discrimination through normativity	Understanding complexity of gender	The importance of language	Seeking acceptance and validation	Coming out	Identity
Information sharing	Space	Exploring your identity	Individual teacher support	Receiving acceptance and validation	Inclusive education settings	Being out at home and at school
Wellbeing	Peers and teachers	Complexities of transitioning	Whole school approaches	Active rejection and invalidation	Negative experiences	Bullying and feeling unsafe at school
Protective factors	Disclosure negotiation	School-related experiences (good and bad practice)	Importance of community	Passive rejection and invalidation		School policies and practices
Journey of identify acceptance	Cognitive restructuring	Support networks	My own best friend			Education about non-binary identities
Impact of diagnosis	Proactive protection					
Knowledge and awareness						
Equality and diversity						
Individual support						

The following table displays how these colour-coded themes translate into the second-order and third-order interpretations:

Initial Theme/Second-order construct	Third-order interpretation
Exploration and formation of identity Navigating ‘coming out’	Journey to self-acceptance
Individual support and acceptance Presence of support networks	Protective factors in school
Whole school approaches to support Proactive protection	Advocating for yourself
The power of choice Hostility and bullying	Active discrimination
Feeling invisible Normativity and stereotypes	Passive discrimination and invalidation
School policies and procedures	

Participants needed for a study looking at the experiences of young people who identify as part of a Sexual Minority...

I am looking for volunteers to take part in a research study looking at the experiences of young people who self-identify as part of a sexual minority (in this case, “sexual minority” refers to multiple sexual minority groups, including, but not limited to, those who identify as lesbian, gay, bi, or ace).

What does participation in this research involve?

Participants will be asked to meet in a safe space in their youth group to chat about their experiences in school. Within this conversation, I might ask you to think about what it is like to be a member of a sexual minority in your school and your experiences of inclusivity in school.

This will involve one session of up to one hour.

What is the research about and why is it important?

Through this research, I hope to gain insight into the experiences of young people who identify as part of a sexual minority and how these experiences might be impacted by our current context (e.g., COVID or the changing RSE curriculum)

It is hoped, that through sharing your experiences, schools and other educational professionals might be able to better understand how to support young people like you in school.

You may be eligible for this study if you:

- Are aged between 15 and 16 years old
- Attend a mainstream secondary school
- Self-identify as belonging to a sexual minority (for further information please contact the researcher)

If you would like to participate in this study, or if you have any further questions, please contact myself or my research supervisor:

Researcher: Eliza Mageean (Trainee Educational Psychologist)

eliza.mageean@nottingham.ac.uk

eliza.mageean@leics.gov.uk

Supervisor: Dr Russell Hounslow

russell.hounslow@nottingham.ac.uk

Appendix G: Participant and parent consent forms

<p>School of Psychology</p> <p>Participant Consent Form</p>



Title of Project: What are the Lived Experiences of Young People in Secondary Schools who Identify as Part of a Sexual Minority in 2022? An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

Ethics Approval Number or Taught Project Archive Number:

Researcher: Eliza Mageean

Email: eliza.mageean@nottingham.ac.uk

Supervisor: Dr Russell Hounslow

Email: russell.hounslow@nottingham.ac.uk

The participant should answer these questions independently:

- Have you read and understood the Information Sheet? YES/NO
- Have you had the opportunity to ask questions about the study? YES/NO
- Have all your questions been answered satisfactorily (if applicable)? YES/NO
- Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from the study? YES/NO
(at any time and without giving a reason)
- I give permission for my data from this study to be shared with other researchers provided that my anonymity is completely protected. YES/NO
- I feel okay to talk about my school experiences and generally feel emotionally well.
YES/NO
- Do you agree to take part in the study? YES/NO

“This study has been explained to me to my satisfaction, and I agree to take part. I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time.”

Signature of the Participant:

Date:

Name (in block capitals)

I have explained the study to the above participant and they have agreed to take part.

Signature of researcher:

Date:

School of Psychology
Parent Consent Form



Title of Project: What are the Lived Experiences of Young People in Secondary Schools who Identify as Part of a Sexual Minority in 2022? An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

Ethics Approval Number or Taught Project Archive Number:

Researcher: Eliza Mageean

Email: eliza.mageean@nottingham.ac.uk

Supervisor: Dr Russell Hounslow

Email: russell.hounslow@nottingham.ac.uk

The participant should answer these questions independently:

- Have you read and understood the Information Sheet? YES/NO
- Have you had the opportunity to ask questions about the study? YES/NO
- Have all your questions been answered satisfactorily (if applicable)? YES/NO
- Do you understand that your child is to withdraw from the study and you are free to withdraw your child? YES/NO
(at any time and without giving a reason)
- I give permission for my child's data from this study to be shared with other researchers provided that their anonymity is completely protected. YES/NO
- I feel my child is generally emotionally well and okay to talk about their school experiences. YES/NO
- Do you agree for your child to take part in the study? YES/NO

“This study has been explained to me to my satisfaction, and I agree for my child to take part. I understand that my child is free to withdraw and I am free to withdraw my child at any time.”

Parent Signature:

Date:

Name (in block capitals)

I have explained the study to the above parent and they have agreed for their child to take part.

Signature of researcher:

Date:

Appendix H: The final interview schedule

- Given all that is happening in the media, including the increasing visibility of members of the LGBTQ+ community and the varied ways in which gender and sexuality can be expressed. Could you tell me about what it is like to be a member of a sexual minority in your school given in the current social and cultural context?

- Can you tell me what your experiences of school have been following the COVID 19 lockdown?
 - Do you think lockdown affected you differently to others?
 - Do you think this has impacted your school experiences?

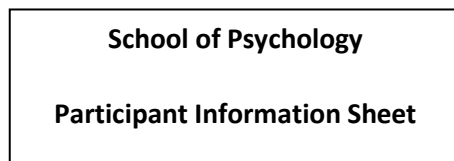
- There's a new curriculum that has been introduced in schools around sex and relationships, which now covers same-sex relationships. Do you feel that this has had an influence on your experiences in school?
 - What have been your experiences of this new curriculum?

- Is there anything that you feel your school has done to be more inclusive given what is happening in the world right now?
 - If yes, what has your school done?
 - How did this make you feel?

- Would you prefer anything to be different at school?
 - Is there anything that you feel would make your school experience better?
 - If not, why is this? What is school doing already?
 - If yes, how do you think this change would impact your school experience?

- Is there anything else regarding your experience in school as a member of a sexual minority you think I should know?
 - Is there anything that you'd like to follow up based on what we've spoken about today?
 - Is there anything you would like to ask me?

Appendix I: Participant and parent information sheets



Title of Project: What are the Lived Experiences of Young People in Secondary Schools who Identify as Part of a Sexual Minority in 2022? An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

Insert Ethics Approval Number or Taught Project Archive Number

Researchers: Eliza Mageean

Supervisors: Dr Russell Hounslow

Contact Details:

eliza.mageean@nottingham.ac.uk

russell.hounslow@nottingham.ac.uk

This is an invitation to take part in a research study on the lived experiences of young people in secondary schools who identify as part of a sexual minority. In this case, 'Sexual Minorities' refers to multiple sexual orientations, including those who identify as lesbian, gay, or bi (APA, 2021).

Before you decide if you wish to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being conducted and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

Who am I and what is this research about?

My name is Ellie and I am training to be an Educational Psychologist. For part of my training, I am researching the experiences of young people who identify as part of a sexual minority.

Why is this research important?

This research will help to develop an understanding of the school experiences of young people who identify as part of a sexual minority so that schools and other educational professionals will know how to support such pupils in education.

Can I take part?

To take part in this study, you must:

- Be under 18 years old
- Attend a mainstream secondary school/educational setting
- Self-identify as belonging to a sexual minority (in this case, “sexual minority” refers to multiple sexual minority groups, including, but not limited to, those who identify as lesbian, gay, bi or ace. Please ask the researcher if you feel unsure).

Importantly, to participate you must be able to safely obtain parental consent if you are under 16.

What my participation will involve?

If you participate, you will be invited to an informal interview with me at your youth group, or online if you would prefer. During the conversation, we will discuss your views and experiences of what it is like to be a young person from a sexual minority in school today. During our conversation, if there are any questions you do not wish to answer, you do not have to. You are able to pause the interview at any point and withdraw from the study without giving reason.

Our discussion will be recorded and transcribed. All data collected will be confidential and use for research purposes only. It will be stored in compliance with the Data Protection Act. I will be the only person with access to this recording and at no point during this research will yourself, your school or youth group be identified. While direct quotes from your interview might be used in written reports, you will not be identifiable.

Do I have to take part?

Your involvement in this study would be voluntary – you are under no obligation to take part. You definitely shouldn't take part if:

- You feel unable to safely obtain parental consent for participation.
- You feel the study might have a negative impact on your wellbeing.

How do I withdraw from the research?

You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without having to explain the reason for this.

How long will my involvement be?

Taking part in this study will involve an interview lasting about one hour.

If you have any questions or concerns please don't hesitate to ask now. We can also be contacted after your participation at the above address.

If you have any complaints about the study, please contact:
Stephen Jackson (Chair of Ethics Committee)
stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk

School of Psychology
Parent/Carer Information Sheet



**The University of
Nottingham**

UNITED KINGDOM • CHINA • MALAYSIA

Title of Project: What are the Lived Experiences of Young People in Secondary Schools who Identify as Part of a Sexual Minority in 2022? An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

Insert Ethics Approval Number or Taught Project Archive Number

Researchers: Eliza Mageean

Supervisor: Dr Russell Hounslow

Contact Details:

eliza.mageean@nottingham.ac.uk

russell.hounslow@nottingham.ac.uk

This is an invitation for your child to take part in a research study examining the lived experiences of young people in secondary schools who identify as part of a sexual minority. In this case, ‘Sexual Minorities’ refers to multiple sexual orientations, including those who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (APA, 2021).

Before you decide if you feel it is okay for your child to be involved in this research, it is important for you to understand why the research is being conducted and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

Who am I and what is this research about?

My name is Ellie and I am training to be an Educational Psychologist. For part of my training, I am researching the experiences of young people who identify as part of a sexual minority.

Why is this research important?

This research will help to develop an understanding of the school experiences of young people who identify as part of a sexual minority so that schools and other educational professionals will know how to support such pupils in education.

Can your child take part?

To take part in this study, your child must:

- Be aged between 15 and 16 years old
- Attend a mainstream secondary school
- Self-identify as belonging to a sexual minority (in this case, “sexual minority” refers to multiple sexual minority groups, including, but not limited to, those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or asexual).

Your child requires parental consent in order to participate in this study.

What will participation involve?

Young people who take part in this study will be invited to an informal interview with me at their youth group. During the conversation, we will discuss their views and experiences of what it is like to be a young person from a sexual minority in school today. During our conversation, if there are any questions that your child does not wish to answer, they do not have to. They are able to pause the interview at any point and withdraw from the study without giving reason.

Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. All data collected will be confidential and used for research purposes only. It will be stored in compliance with the Data Protection Act. I will be the only person with access to this recording and at no point during this research will yourself, your child, your child’s school or youth group be identified. While direct quotes from your child’s interview might be used in written reports, your child will not be identifiable.

Does my child have to take part?

Your child’s involvement in this study is voluntary – they are under no obligation to take part. Your child definitely should not take part if:

- You feel unable to provide parental consent for their participation.
- You feel the study might have a negative impact on their wellbeing.

How long will my child’s involvement be?

Taking part in this study will involve an interview lasting about one hour.

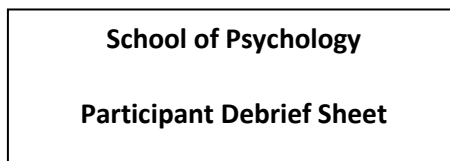
What if my child or I change our mind?

Your child has the right to withdraw from the study at any time without having to explain the reason for this. Similarly, if you feel you would prefer your child not to be involved any further, then you can withdraw your child from this project.

If you, or your child, have any questions or concerns please don't hesitate to ask now. We can also be contacted after your child's participation at the above address.

If you have any complaints about the study, please contact:
Stephen Jackson (Chair of Ethics Committee)
stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk

Appendix J: Participant debrief sheet



Title of Project: What are the Lived Experiences of Young People in Secondary Schools who Identify as Part of a Sexual Minority in 2022? An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

Insert Ethics Approval Number or Taught Project Archive Number

Researchers: Eliza Mageean

Supervisors: Dr Russell Hounslow

Contact Details:

eliza.mageean@nottingham.ac.uk

russell.hounslow@nottingham.ac.uk

Thank you for your participation in my study.

It is hoped that the experiences you have shared through this interview process will help to develop our understanding of what it is like to be a member of a sexual minority in a secondary school in the U.K. In turn, this has the potential to provide us with insight into how educational practice can become more inclusive of all young people who identify as part of a sexual minority.

As highlighted to you prior to your interview, all of your personal details will be kept confidential and stored in a secure way. I will be the only one with access to your interview recording. This recording will be transcribed by me, with care being taken to anonymise any identifiable information (including your name, school and youth group). At any time following your participation you can contact me to withdraw your data from the study. You can do this without explanation or consequence. However, as previously explained, if you withdraw following the point at which I have started to analyse my data, I would reserve the right to use the interview data you have provided. To withdraw, please contact myself or my supervisor at the email addresses above. Alternatively, please speak to a member of staff at your youth group.

If you have any further questions or concerns about the research study, please contact myself or my research supervisor at the email addresses provided above. If you feel that anything we have discussed today has affected you, I have provided some links below to the websites of charities which are aimed to support young people who identify as belonging to a sexual minority. These websites

provide access to different resources that you might find helpful. Alternatively, if you feel distressed at any point following your involvement in this study, please speak with a trusted adult or a member of staff at your youth group.

Further Support

Young Stonewall – www.youngstonewall.org.uk

This is a charity based in the UK which offers information, resources and support for those who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community. If you need to talk to someone, you can also call the Stonewall information service on 08000 50 20 20.

The Proud Trust – www.theproudtrust.org/for-young-people

This is a UK-based charity who support LGBTQ+ youth. Their website offers lots of help and advice for young people.

Colours Youth Network – www.coloursyouthnetwork.com

“Colours Youth Network uplifts, supports and empowers young people of colour who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex (QTIPOC) aged 16-25, to explore and celebrate who they are through meaningful connections to other young people and a team of experienced QTIPOC youth workers.”

Fflag – www.fflag.org.uk

“FFLAG is part of the Safe Space Alliance, which is a LGBTQI+ led non-profit organisation that aims to help people identify, navigate, and create safe spaces for the LGBTQI+ community worldwide.”

Helpful Resources

Anna Freud LGBTQI+ Mental Health Resource – <https://www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/lgbtqi-mental-health>

Allsorts Youth Project – <https://www.allsortsyouth.org.uk/resources>

Appendix K: An example of a transcription from the current study with exploratory noting and the construction of experiential statements

Extracts from Ash's initial transcription

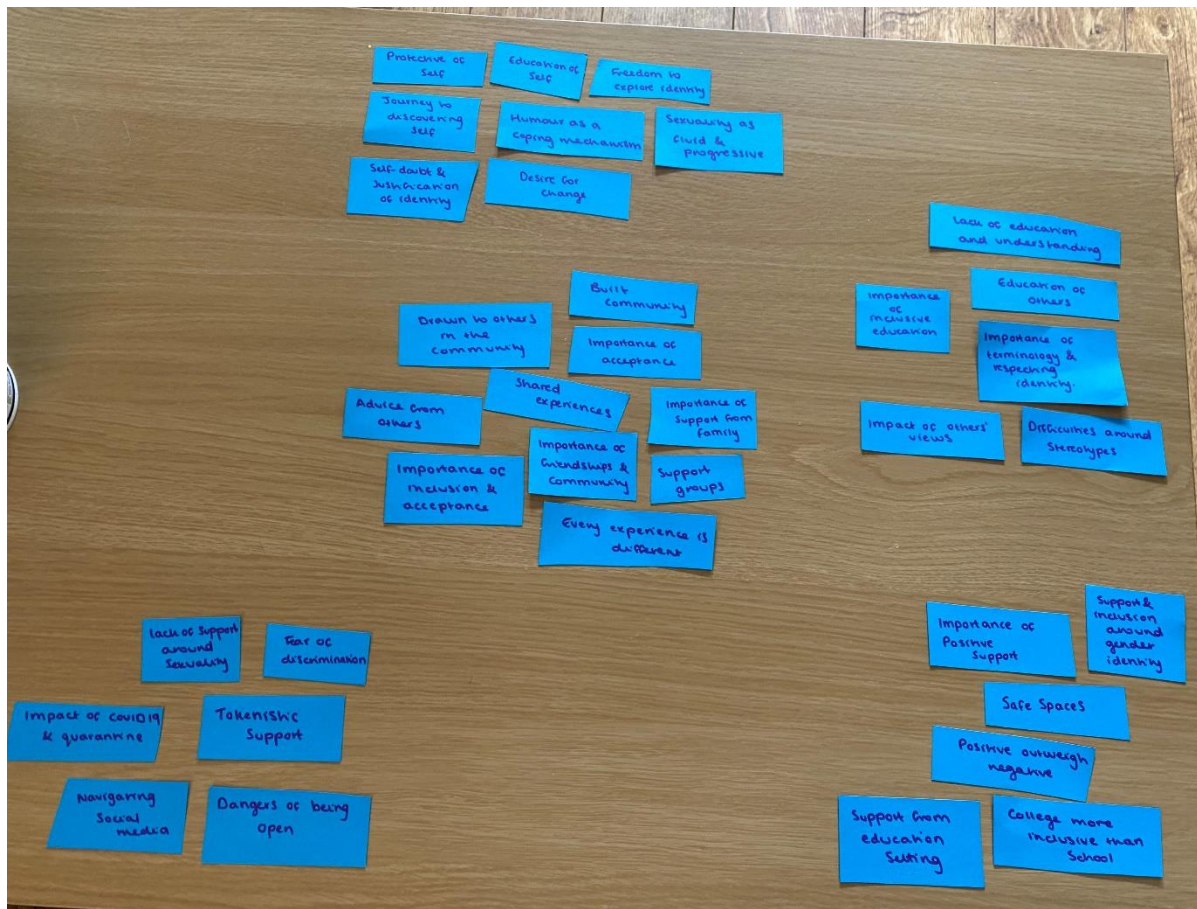
<p>Exploratory Noting Descriptive – normal text Linguistic – <i>italics</i> Conceptual – bold</p>	<p>Original Transcript</p>	<p>Experiential Statements</p>
<p>Eager to begin conversation – facilitate change?</p>	<p>Int: So, starting off...do you attend college at the moment? Is that the setting you're-</p> <p>Ash: -Yes...I erm am currently doing my first year of my Art and Design foundation, I have previously done two other years of Health and Social Care at the same college so, I'm still there...yeah...</p> <p>Int: Brilliant...and are you enjoying that...course?</p> <p>Ash: Er <u>yeah</u> it's really fun...(laughs)</p> <p>Int: Perfect...erm so you've been at the same setting...is this your third year in that setting then?</p> <p>Ash: <u>Mhm</u> yep</p>	<p>Desire for change</p>
<p>Difficult journey with lots of questioning and uncertainty along the way (questioning yourself and being questioned by others – self-doubt?)</p> <p>Views of others impacting your identity (highlights importance of support of</p>	<p>Int: Okay great and...how-how would you say that you identify your-yourself?</p> <p>Ash: Erm...so...oh it's a hard one...it's a whole thing, it's a whole thing...so I came out when I was 12 years old to my mum and I said I was bisexual and she kind of was like "Okay...erm are you <u>sure</u>?" <u>y'know</u> kind of advising me...and I quite...kind of...to myself, I didn't really like-I wasn't open about it in secondary because I knew it wasn't a safe space and I knew-not a lot of people who I knew were also out at the same time and so erm...I kept to myself and then quarantine came and I was like...out of the closet completely open I was like "Okay I think I'm bisexual with a preference for women now" but...erm...then that kind of slowly progressed into erm being pansexual...identifying as pansexual and understanding that I didn't really like...have a restriction of people...and just kind of liked everybody. Then that also led me to discover my erm...<u>erm</u>(long pause) own gender...identity...which er...I now identify as...non-binary...which erm doesn't like...I don't know...if somebody came up to me and was like...erm "you don't look...necessarily...non-binary" it's because I don't conform to...looking androgynous ...</p> <p>Int: Yeah, yep...</p>	<p>Journey to discovering <u>yourself</u></p> <p>Advice from others</p> <p>The impact of others' views</p>
<p>Quarantine seems like a turning point – period of exploration and feeling more open.</p> <p><i>Long pause – seems a bit uncomfortable (perhaps due to experiencing judgement and fear before to wary of making this known to others)</i></p> <p>Seems to be justifying identity – fear?</p> <p>Justification of identity (still self-doubt? Perhaps instilled by the views others)</p> <p>Recognition that you don't need to conform to a stereotype (perhaps this is what is expected)</p> <p>Long journey to identity and acceptance (<i>perhaps laughter as some relief to feel comfortable and open</i>)</p>	<p>Int: Yeah, yep...</p> <p>Ash: -And I don't think androgyny is-is for everybody and it doesn't...suit me particularly...for me I like being feminine I like having m-my long hair I like make up I like all the different things that come with being feminine so yeah</p>	<p>Dangers of being open</p> <p>Impact of COVID <u>19</u> and quarantine</p> <p>Sexuality as fluid and progressive</p> <p>Self-doubt and justification of identity</p> <p>The impact of other's views</p> <p>Self-doubt and justification of identity</p> <p>Difficulties around stereotypes</p> <p>Journey to discovering <u>yourself</u></p> <p>Importance of acceptance</p>

<p><i>Sigh – hard to reflect on a “weird” time.</i></p> <p>Big influence on journey to discovering self – time to think and reflect on identity.</p> <p>Struggles of lockdown with little support from friends.</p> <p>Perhaps joking as uncomfortable – difficult time to be going through process of discovery alone.</p> <p>Seems to have difficulty expanding on this time (perhaps unwillingness to reflect much further)</p> <p><i>“change” – impactful word to use (repeated – they feel changed as a result of this period?)</i></p> <p><i>Rule of 3 – “this label, this label, this label”</i></p> <p>How impactful the media can be and what is happening in the world</p>	<p>ely fine...I think d-I don't think she's had very much experience...I don't <u>wanna</u> talk on her behalf...but she hasn't had that m-much experience...neither h-have I really...but you know what I mean?</p> <p>Int: Yeah, yep...</p> <p>Ash: It's just a case of understanding...going somewhere...experiencing...erm...</p> <p>Int: Absolutely...</p> <p>Ash: Erm...she...I think she identifies as...I <u>wanna</u> say bisexual as well...but...yeah <u>so</u> I've had a range of people around me who have completely supported me...so yeah...</p> <p>Int: Yeah...and it shows you just how fluid things are and how accepting people can be, doesn't it? And I think you mentioned that you had quite a...erm...a journey with your identity around the-the quarantine...kind of lockdown period...erm...</p> <p>Ash: Oh <u>yeah</u> I did...</p> <p>Int: Yeah...did-do you feel that that lockdown period kind of affected you differently...do you think there was kind of the support available for you... you</p>	<p>Impact of COVID 19 and quarantine</p> <p>Journey to discovering <u>yourself</u></p> <p>Impact of COVID 19 and quarantine</p> <p>Humour as a coping mechanism</p> <p>Protective of self</p> <p>Journey to discovering <u>yourself</u></p>
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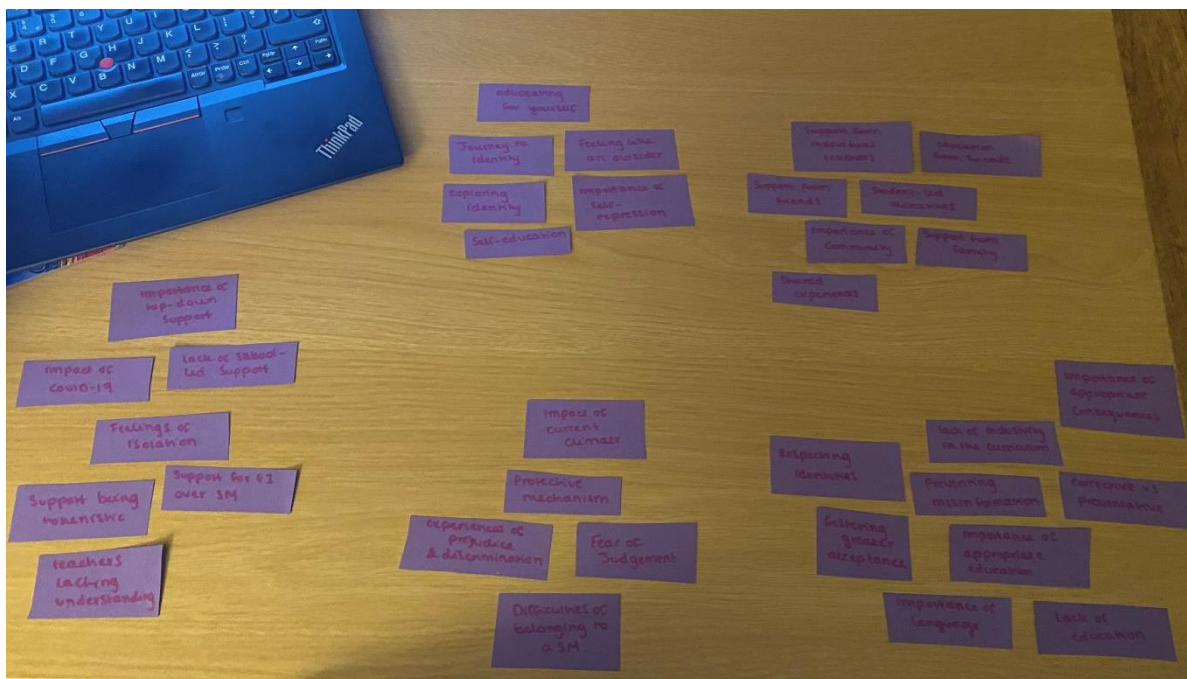
<p><i>“allowing you to be yourself” – strong statement. Feels as though you have to be ‘allowed’ by others to be open about your identity (fear of others?)</i></p> <p><i>“you’ve got to be careful about what you say, what you do” – fear of discrimination.</i></p> <p>Justification for negative behaviour – protective mechanism? Admitting defeat? (this is something you have to accept, comes with your identity)</p> <p>Associating with people who are accepting – don't have to be fearful.</p> <p>Others impact how safe you feel in school/college (concerned about safety if you are open)</p>	<p>time to find where you fit with your identity...like during lockdown and stuff...erm being isolated and trying to figure this out...</p> <p>Int: Yeah, I guess it was hard to try to understand how you were feeling-</p> <p>Ash: Yeah lockdown was a hard time...I had social media...like messenger...erm and c-could erm...talk to people...but that's not the same as being in person and...having someone to talk to about it all...and the media can be a scary place when you are confused about y-yourself-not confused but like unsure about it...y'know...like not sure about what I identify as...if there even is a label...</p> <p>Int: That can be very isolating...</p> <p>Ash: It definitely was...but it was also quite a freeing time erm...y'know...I had access to these social media <u>pages</u> and it helped me to understand myself...like relating to people on there a bit y'know? There are so many <u>labels</u> and you can be...you can be pretty much anyone-you can identify as whatever you feel...it's so open and...I love every part of it...so yeah...</p> <p>(Pause)</p>	<p>Importance of acceptance</p> <p>Dangers of being open</p> <p>Protective of self</p> <p>The impact of others' views</p> <p>Importance of friendships and community</p> <p>Dangers of being open</p>
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Appendix L: Searching for connections across experiential statements to develop the PETs.

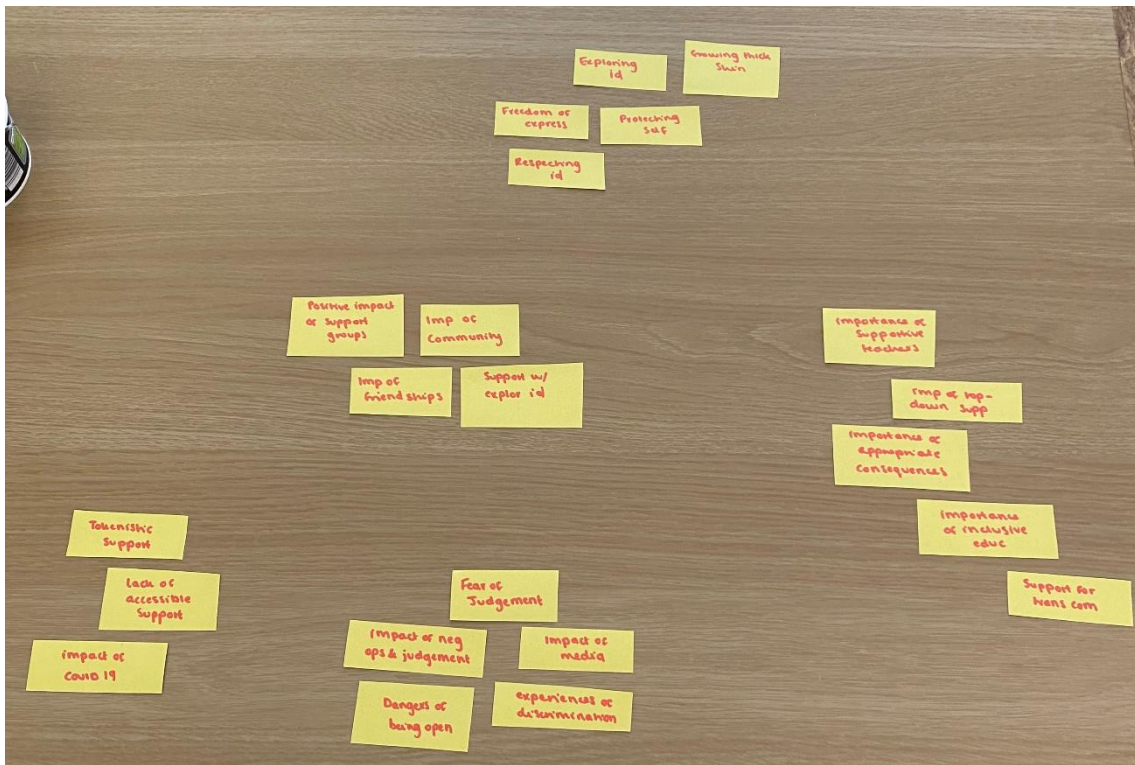
Grouping the experiential statements for Ash:



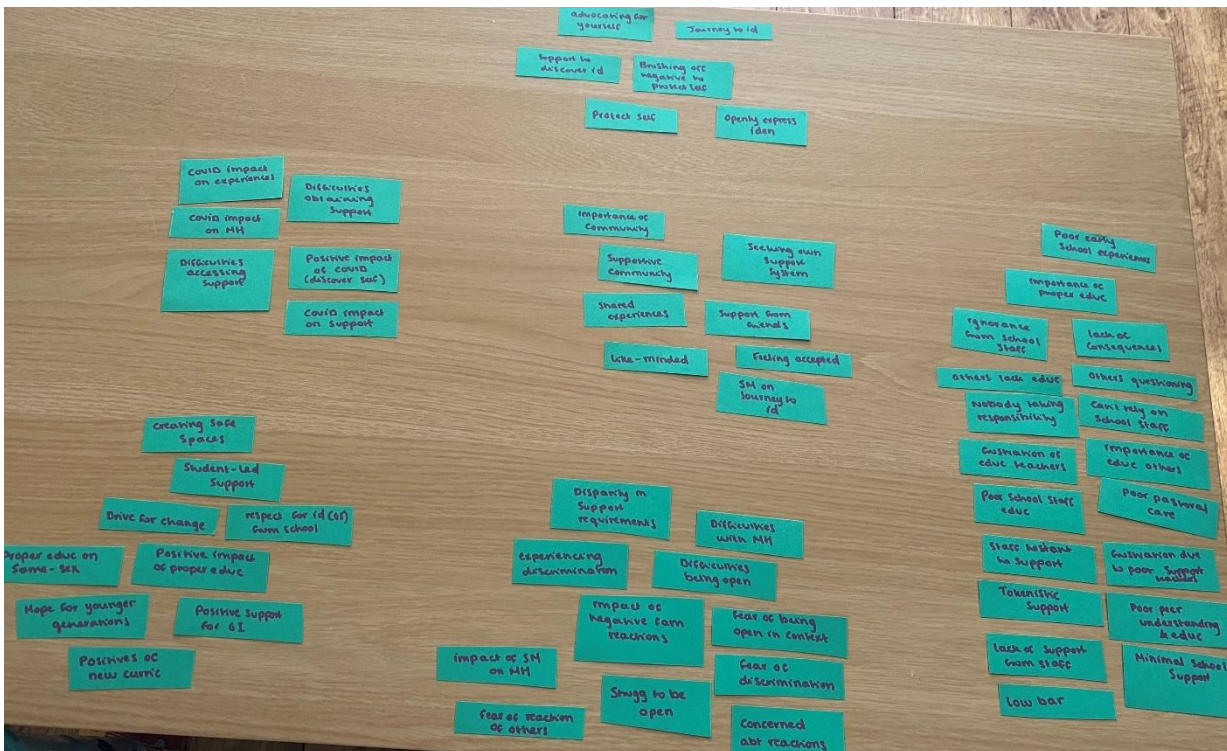
Grouping the experiential statements for Ben:



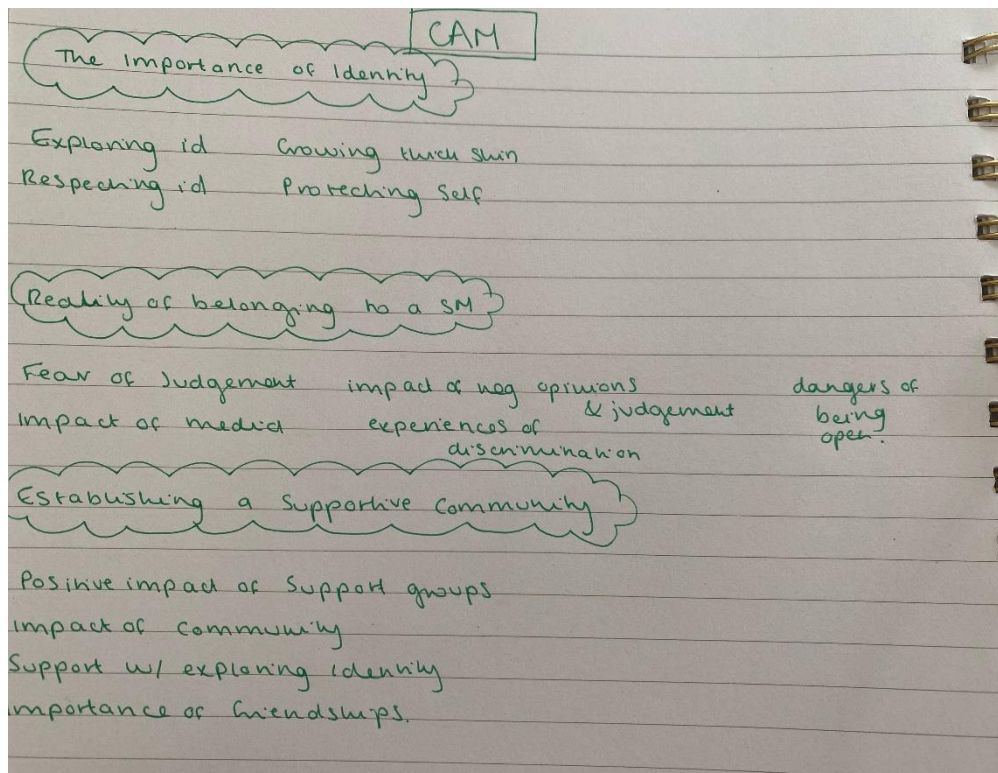
Group experiential statements for Cam:



Group experiential statements for Dan:

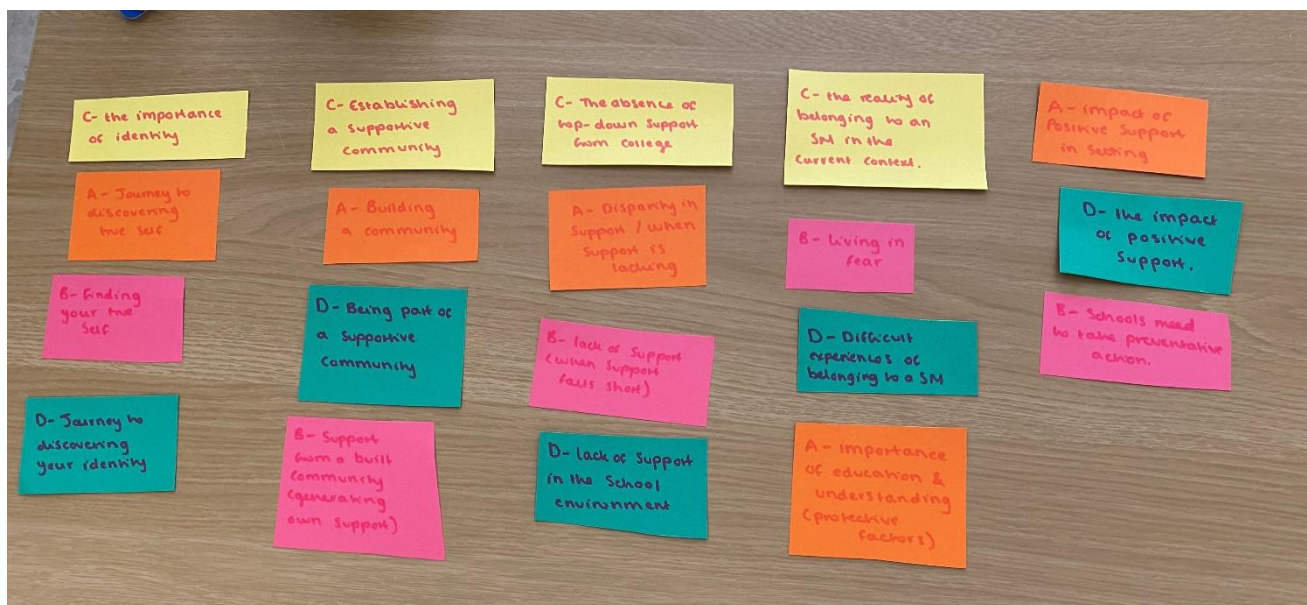


Appendix M: Naming the PETs



An example of naming the PETs for Cam's interview. Involving noting down the groups of experiential themes and devising appropriate names for these groups.

Appendix N: Developing the Group Experiential Themes



PETs constructed across the four individual participant interviews were noted on coloured sticky notes indicating which transcript they were originally from (letters written on each note correspond to the original participant). These PETs were then organised and re-organised into GETs based on their original content and the links between them. This resulted in the five GETs displayed above.

Appendix O: Reflexive Research Diary Extracts

Stage	Reflection	Next Steps
Interview Schedule Development	<p>I had a supervision with XX today looking at my interview schedule and how to develop it. I'm not happy with it at the moment, I'm worried that it feels too leading and that it's not open enough. I think it might be best to do a trial run first to see how it plays out.</p> <p>I chatted to some members of the LGBTQ+ community and we talked about the language I'm using and how appropriate this is. It's so important for me to recognise the population I am working with and to be mindful of the impact of language. We had a session on placement with Stonewall and I feel that I have a good understanding of the language that is appropriate. It will help to go through the questions and to ensure that they are appropriate and accessible. There's a lot more consideration for the interview schedule than I first thought. I supposed it will develop as I go through the interviews too, and as I learn more about LGBTQ+ young people.</p>	<p>To a trial interview. Explore the language used in my interview (and throughout the thesis!)</p>
Ethical Considerations	<p>I was granted ethical approval today, so I can definitely do my research! Such a relief but I need to make sure that I adhere to the guidelines. I think it will be tricky to recruit 15–16-year-olds and have included a contingency plan. I need to remember that even though 16+ YP might not need parental consent, the research must be low risk. Something else to consider and remain aware of.</p>	<p>Begin recruitment. Maintain ethical awareness.</p>
Recruitment of Participants	<p>I anticipated that participant recruitment would be tricky but I have faced so many barriers that I'm starting to think I won't get any participants at all! Another youth group turned me down today, and this is the biggest one in XXX. I have also had two YP contact me and not get back to me after I reiterated that they would need parental consent. It's frustrating as I feel like I am missing out on hearing from YP who are keen to participate. What about the voices of those who can't gain parental consent and are struggling with their identities? That's something that I'll need to consider when discussing my findings, if I get any!!</p> <p>I think I might have to begin with my contingency plan. I have recruited two young people who are 16-18 and attending college. They won't have had experience of the new RSE curriculum, but they will have had experience of education settings. This might change my focus slightly but I will still be able to answer my research question.</p>	<p>Go ahead with the contingency plan. Maintain awareness of YP who can't take part.</p>
Recruitment of Participants	<p>I have recruited my final participant! I have four altogether and have struggled so much to get to this point. In IPA research four is enough, but ideally I would have liked a couple more. This should allow me to generate a really in</p>	<p>Conduct my interviews.</p>

	<p>depth discussion which is exciting. The participants are all quite different, however I have noticed that three of them are also gender diverse. This create a new area of discussion involving intersectionality. I'm worried that with this in mind, I won't be answering the research question as they do not just belong to a sexual minority. I discussed this with XX in tutorial and he said that it will be an interesting angle and something to consider in the discussion section. This actually feels quite exciting and I can see avenues for future research already.</p>	<p>Discuss intersectionality and the impact of this.</p>
<p>Conducting First Interview</p>	<p>I did my first interview today and it went really well. I was nervous because I wanted to make sure that I remained reflexive and aware of my own views. I did not want to impose these onto Cam and impact his interview. The interview was quite short and Cam was quite reserved however I think I was able to gather a good insight into his experiences. I tried not ask any leading questions and I think my interview schedule worked well, there is nothing that I would change going into the next interview.</p> <p>At one point I felt sad and frustrated for Cam and the experiences he has had in his setting. I tried not to let this impact our interview but perhaps my non-verbals gave this away. I didn't expect it to be so difficult to maintain the researcher hat and to try to not impose my views. I think I did well but I need to continue to be reflexive and to recognise my own views, this diary is helpful for that!</p>	<p>Conduct next interviews. Maintain reflexivity.</p>
<p>Beginning Analysis</p>	<p>It had been interesting transcribing the interviews and hearing the views of the participants without worrying about follow up questions! Although I do not like hearing my own voice back!</p> <p>Listening to the interviews, I think I did well and didn't impose my views on the participants. They each spoke so eloquently and it was powerful to hear the interviews back. When analysing this data, I need to continue to be reflexive and recognise the impact that my experiences and views might have. Some of the participants spoke about their positive experiences of support for gender diverse young people in their settings. This support seemed a bit tokenistic and easy to me, although is this just me being cynical or is that what the participants meant? I need to be careful not to impose my views! Although I key part of IPA is interpretation, and that is my interpretation of what the participants said. This process is difficult but so interesting.</p>	<p>Transcribe and analyse data.</p>

Appendix P: Ethical Approval



The University of
Nottingham

UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

School of Psychology

The University of Nottingham
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Ref: **S1427**

Monday 16th May 2022

Dear Eliza Mageean and Russell Hounslow,

Ethics Committee Review

Thank you for submitting an account of your proposed research '*What are the lived experiences of young people who identify as part of a sexual minority in secondary schools in 2022? An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis.*'

That proposal has now been reviewed and we are pleased to tell you it has met with the Committee's approval.

However:

Please note the following comments from our reviewers;

Reviewer One:

- *Include max number of participants*
- *Add to info sheets that it concerns an audio recording*
- *Ask consent for the recording*

Reviewer Two:

- *Is the audio recording deleted after it has been transcribed? Doesn't seem necessary to keep that recording once it has been transcribed. Important to make clear what happens to the audio recording in the information and debrief sheets.*

Final responsibility for ethical conduct of your research rests with you or your supervisor. The Codes of Practice setting out these responsibilities have been published by the British Psychological Society and the University Research Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns whatever during the conduct of your research then you should consult those Codes of Practice. The Committee should be informed immediately should any participant complaints or adverse events arise during the study.

Independently of the Ethics Committee procedures, supervisors also have responsibilities for the risk assessment of projects as detailed in the safety pages of the University web site. Ethics Committee approval does not alter, replace, or remove those responsibilities, nor does it certify that they have been met.