Belonging as a matter of social justice:

LGBTQ+ students' experiences and perspectives

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Abstract

Legal protections such as the UK Equality Act (2010) guarantee that LGBTQ+ students are given access to education. However, if they are not accepted, respected, and supported by their peers or teachers, their development of a sense of belonging in education, and in turn their educational experience and outcomes, could be adversely affected. This is the case presented in this thesis. As a qualitative project it focuses on the experiences and perspectives of ten self-identified LGBTQ+ students completing post-compulsory education in a further and higher education college in England. Their mostly negative experience of school due to their queer identities and/or expressions contrasted to that in post-compulsory education. A central concern is that socially constructed (mis)understandings of a queer ontology, supported by hegemonic heteronormativity, places queer individuals at a disadvantage when those around them reject or avoid them. At the root of this we find the normative nature of early socialisation related to the rights and wrongs of gender identity and expression, which largely influences our responses towards gender/sexual minorities (Morantes-Africano, 2023).To articulate this as an issue related to learning, and therefore concerning education, this inquiry uses the notion of 'epistemic injustice' (Fricker, 2007) to argue that there is new knowledge and language around gender/sexual diversity, such as non-binary and trans identities that are largely misunderstood by the general population due to a lack of collective interpretive tools to make sense of these. Given that educators are central to the educational experience of their students, if they are not offered professional learning about this, inclusive initiatives may not translate into educational practice. As a knowledge project, this thesis favours a standpoint epistemology to interpret how queer onto-epistemologies offer unique and valuable epistemic contributions to the research intentions. The use of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019; 2021) enabled the formulation of a framework of belonging for education, comprising personal and sociocultural factors to be considered, not only for LGBTQ+ students but for the larger student population: 1) identity, 2) personality, 3) needs, and 4) motivations, are part of the subjective dimensions of belonging. These are situated within 5) institutional opportunities, and a need to support both 6) students and 7) educators in their pedagogical practice. Learners joining or aspiring to join post-compulsory education are on a journey of being and becoming. The former is to be understood as intrinsic, such as our core identity and basic human needs, which are part of our nature. In addition to these, we have our personality and motivations, both of which are susceptible to change, therefore are part of our becoming. These subjective aspects (identity, personality, needs and motivations) are contingent to the external structures that influence our lived experience, such as the learning environment and the institutional approaches to support or otherwise minoritised individuals. The interplay of our identity and personality, with our needs and motivations, becomes a dance of internal and invisible aspects of ourselves, and those that we exteriorise, either as a choice or as a strategy to navigate complex social life. The situatedness of minoritised individuals in a predominantly heteronormative social practice places an extra onus on education to address injustices and inequalities. Therefore, both opportunities and support are necessary to foster a feeling of acceptance, respect, value, and support for queer lives. Aspects of support concern both educators and students, as caring for those who care is central to my argument that belonging is a matter of justice.

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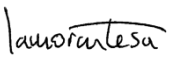
Author's declaration

"I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution."

Printed Name: Leonardo Morantes-Africano Signature: 

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I dedicate this thesis to all past, present and future queer individuals. I stand in solidarity with you.

Publications derived from work on the Doctoral Programme

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Chapter one: Introduction

Rationale

This qualitative research project takes place in a large further and higher education college in the northeast of England (MyCampus henceforth). It critically explores inclusive practice in post-compulsory education, which is the context of my academic and professional practice as a teacher educator. MyCampus is also the setting of the ten participants who took part in this research. Stipulations in Article 2 of the Human Rights Act (1988) ensure access to education, whilst the protective measures against unlawful discrimination of individuals based on their gender reassignment, sex, or sexual orientation enshrined in the UK Equality Act (2010) should provide a safe, inclusive environment. However, my thesis argues that despite these progressive moves and legislative adaptations, there is still a lot of work to be done to dispel myths and address epistemic gaps (Fricker, 2007) that sustain inequalities towards gender/sexual minorities. Fricker's (2007; 2014) theory of epistemic injustices threads most of the rationale presented in this thesis and will be discussed later.

An example of an epistemic gap central to this research is the collective misunderstanding of a queer identity as a choice, a sin, or an illness. Something which has been historically misconstrued by religion, medicine, and law (Schnabel, 2018; Seal, 2019; Solomon, 2014). Instead, it is argued that this should be interpreted and treated as part of natural human diversity: in essence while many queer individuals are born this way, many others discover themselves as part of their life trajectories; in any case their existence deserves dignity and respect in all cases. This brings a central concern for current or prospective LGBTQ+ students joining post-compulsory education. According to UCAS and Stonewall (2021), 1 in 13 university applicants declared they are LGBTQ+, constituting about 7% of the overall population (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2021). Also, figures from the 2021 UK census show that 16- to 24-year-olds were most likely to identify as LGBTQ+ (Booth & Goodier, 2023; ONS, 2022, 2023), which is the age of the student population where my research takes place. A main argument of my thesis is that LGBTQ+ students can legally access education opportunities; however, if they are not accepted, respected, valued and supported by peers and/or teachers, their educational experience and outcomes could be

jeopardised. This motivated me to study *belonging* as a fundamental human need that for queer individuals is already bound to be complex due to all of the above. In this way, I critically question the notion of equal opportunities, or at least highlight that, as Tinto (2008) suggests, access without support is not opportunity.

Regarding the student experience of LGBTQ+ individuals, Stonewall (2019, para. 5) states that 'anti-LGBT bullying and language unfortunately remain commonplace in Britain's schools'. Nearly 50% of LGBTQ+ students face bullying due to their identity (Stonewall, 2019). Concerningly, the Government Equalities Office (2018, p. 16) indicates that 88% of negative incidents involving LGBTQ+ students are perpetrated by peers, while 9% are attributed to teaching staff. This ought to concern teacher education as a sector responsible for the professional formation of caring, compassionate and 'response-able' (Barad, 2007) educators. The latter term will be central to the articulation of the agentic ways in which educational praxis is a practice which is 'informed, reflective, self-consciously moral and political, and oriented towards making positive educational and societal change' (Mahon et al., 2020, p. 15).

I agree with Carr and Kemmis' (2005, p. 354) assertion that 'the struggle, not *for* justice, but *against injustice*, still impels action and thought, and practice and theorising'—something they emphasise in their original work. This means considering education as an act of care. From my experience, a vast majority of educators do care for their students, their learning, and their educational experience, making an ethics of care a relational matter. Feeling that one matters is important to develop a sense of belonging (Hallam, 2023). However, when LGBTQ+ students experience hostility, rejection or avoidance from those around them, it is difficult for them to feel safe, connected, and motivated to be their authentic selves. This means that their self-worth and sense of belonging can be negatively affected. For example, regarding school experiences, Stonewall (2023a) reports that;

- 42% of LGBT+ school pupils have been bullied in the past year, double the number of non-LGBT+ pupils (21%).
- 48% of pupils have had little to no positive messaging about being LGBT+ at school in the last year. However, pupils whose schools had positive messaging about being LGBT+ also had reduced suicidal thoughts and feelings – regardless of whether they are LGBT+ or not.

- Half of LGBT pupils hear homophobic slurs 'frequently' or 'often' at school.
- Seven in ten LGBT pupils report that their school says that homophobic and biphobic bullying is wrong, up from half in 2012 and a quarter in 2007. However, just two in five LGBT pupils report that their schools say that transphobic bullying is wrong.

About transitions from school to post-compulsory education, UCAS and Stonewall (2021) surveyed 3,000 students who identified as LGBT+ in their UCAS application. They report that,

- 47% said that their experience being LGBT+ at school or college was good, and 41% said their experience was neutral. Of those that had a good experience, over three-quarters said this was due to being accepted by their peers.
- 12% said that they did not have a good experience. Of those, 70% said the reason was that their identity was not reflected in things they learned at school or college.
- Students identifying as transgender were more likely (17%) to report having a bad experience at school or college, most of whom attributed bullying as the main reason. This, coupled with the lower attainment and higher rates of mental health conditions among trans students, highlights the additional issues faced by this group of students at school or college.
- Students are really looking forward to a positive experience in higher education – 53% of LGBT+ students expect their overall student experience to be good, and a further 24% expect it to be very good.

Regarding higher education, Stonewall and YouGov (2018, p. 5) surveyed 522 LGBT students about their experience at Britain's universities. While many aspects were positive, the below is worth highlighting for a consideration of belonging:

- More than a third of trans students (36 per cent) and seven per cent of lesbian, gay and bi students who aren't trans faced negative comments or conduct from university staff in the last year because they are LGBT.
- Three in five trans students (60 per cent) and more than one in five lesbian, gay and bi students who aren't trans (22 per cent) have been the target of negative comments or conduct from other students.
- LGBT disabled students are particularly likely to have been the target of such remarks from other students; almost half of LGBT disabled students (47 per cent) have experienced this.
- Seven per cent of trans students were physically attacked by another student or a member of university staff in the last year because of being trans.

- One in five trans students (20 per cent) were encouraged by university staff to hide or disguise that they are trans.
- Two in five trans students (39 per cent) and more than one in five lesbian, gay and bi students (22 per cent) wouldn't feel confident reporting any homophobic, biphobic or transphobic bullying to university staff.
- More than two in five LGBT students (42 per cent) hid or disguised that they are LGBT at university in the last year because they were afraid of discrimination.
- One in four non-binary students (24 per cent) and one in six trans students (16 per cent) don't feel able to wear clothes representing their gender expression at university.
- One in six trans students (17 per cent) report being unable to use the toilet they feel comfortable with at university.

These statistics highlight a trajectory where challenges start appearing during school but gradually lessen as students move towards chosen fields of study or training in further and higher education. However, this thesis is centred on positioning belonging as a matter of justice. As humans are innately social beings, we need each other to exist (Brown, 2017). Therefore, more attention ought to be given to the factors that enable or hinder students' sense of belonging in education, with particular attention to LGBTQ+ students facing the above challenges.

Research aim

This thesis highlights a moral duty to consider LGBTQ+ students' as part of inclusive initiatives. Its overall aim is to interpret the experiences and perspectives of ten self-identified LGBTQ+ students in post-compulsory education to elucidate how their educational experience could inform inclusive practice. As a futures-oriented project, the research seeks to:

1. Analyse subjective accounts of LGBTQ+ students' educational experience.
2. Interpret which factors are salient to inform student belonging in post-compulsory education.
3. Draw learning from the above for teachers and teaching.

As a teacher educator for the post-compulsory sector, I support the professional formation of pre-service and in-service educators. Policy, standards and the initial teacher education curriculum expect educators to enact inclusive practice (Advance HE, 2023; Education and Training Foundation, 2022; Ofsted, 2019a, 2019b, 2023c, 2023d), but there is little guidance on what it means, or how to do it. In addition to this, with the emergence of gender pronouns, and trans identities being more visible (Armistead, 2022; Jones, 2023; Stonewall, 2022), I have noticed an increase in critical incidents (Tripp, 1993) related to my student-teachers' divided opinions on the matter.

A significant one came from the challenge that an engineering lecturer was experiencing since he had a trans student and could not comprehend, nor agree, with the '*change of name, pronouns and toilet situation'[sic]*, as he described it. I responded in two ways to him; first, I acknowledged his struggle and offered him comfort by saying 'Why would you? if you haven't experienced this before, or had a lived experience of trans individuals, this is new to you and perhaps for many of us too'. This led to the next response, which was to adopt an educational approach to explore this with him and the rest of the group. We discussed issues of power and oppression, as educators are in a position to support and affirm their students' identities or make their lives difficult if they chose to do so. This made me realise that I had made assumptions regarding the legal protections that queer students have, but had never considered that teachers may not always agree with or know how to enact these protections. As such, without professional learning around diverse needs, some students may be in a disadvantageous position if their teachers are unprepared to enact inclusive practice (Desmarchelier, 2000; National Education Union, 2022; Stonewall, 2020).

The case above, sadly, is not an isolated one. A recently reported case of a UK secondary Maths teacher being sacked for refusing to use a trans student's name and pronouns (Boobyer & PA Media, 2024; Minchin, 2024) made me realise that with the emergence of new language there is clear need to make the topic of gender identity a relevant topic for the professional learning of educators. I base this on a reflection of a past where Dyslexia was a concept unknown to us, meaning that students were unable to articulate their own experience, and educators could not support a need they did not know existed (Rose, 2009; Snowling et al.,

2020). Similarly, left-handed people were 'historically forced as children to use their right hands for tasks where they would naturally use their left hand' (BBC, 2022, para. 13). I argue that there is immense power in hearing the voices of the minoritised. Their interpreted accounts of their reality can turn our gaze to new realities, especially when their educational experience and outcomes are at stake.

The role of educators and education is not to indoctrinate but to gesture towards that which we may not have seen before. This aligns education to a problem-posing stance (Freire, 1970). In this way, I invite the reader to contemplate how the emergence of new language has allowed queer youth to self-identify as non-binary or transition from their assigned gender/sex at birth to that which they feel is more natural to them. I state this as a queer individual myself, which entangles me in the knowing-as-being used to articulate the situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988; Wickramasinghe, 2006) favoured in this thesis. For a long time, I did not know what gay was, I thought I was the only one experiencing this. However, the power of finding others with similar experiences offered a MeToo resonance that helped me make sense of my experience. There is power in being able to understand and communicate our identities (Griffin, 2020).

What follows in the next two sections, exploring theories, principles and frameworks of belonging, is rooted in a need to address collective epistemic gaps. Fricker (2007) defines these as 'hermeneutical injustices'. This means that from an inclusion point of view, the legal protections of queer individuals to have a right to access education may exhaust the argument. Whereas when we consider that their sense of belonging is complex, multilayered and contingent to internal and external factors, we have grounds to make it worth analysing.

In asking LGBTQ+ participants to share their experiences and perspectives of their educational journey, this research embraces two distinct dimensions of a queer onto-epistemology. First, experiences can be understood as interpreted accounts of my participants' realities, including their past and present educational journeys. Perspectives, on the other hand, are related to what participants could envision as a preferable or desirable future (Inayatullah, 2013) educational practice. These two aspects make the conceptualisation of belonging presented here co-constructed, contingent, and complex. This requires the reader to make an extra effort to

interpret, reflect, connect, evaluate, and question the information presented here and how it can relate to their personal, academic, and/or professional life.

Bozalek (2021) suggests that doing 'response-able' research 'responsibly' means being responsive as well as accountable to social justice and care ethics. My work responds to both expectations. As a response-able researcher, I use my identities as a queer teacher educator and researcher to propose belonging as a matter of justice for LGBTQ+ individuals in social practice. My work adopts a queer onto-epistemology (Barad, 2007) to posit a queer existence as relational, rather than foundational. In relational ontology, 'entities, or subjects and objects do not pre-exist relationships, but rather come into being through relationships' (Bozalek, 2021, para. 1). This relationality is significant for the standpoint epistemology (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1992; Rolin, 2009) adopted in this thesis, where the voices of LGBTQ+ students are privileged. Their lived experience and perspectives could offer valuable interpretive tools to be used in inclusive educational practice.

From the outset, I declare that my personal, academic, and professional lives are entangled in the co-construction of knowledges presented in this thesis. In agreement with Rhee (2021, p. 4), 'who I am is never separable from what I know and how I know or vice versa. This matters because I can write only what I know and again what I know is never separable from who I am'. This aspect of being as a way of knowing (Wickramasinghe, 2006) also engages a moral dimension, as through changing how we come to know we can also change how to ethically be. From this perspective, 'our theories need to do more than simply describe the world as it is; they need to challenge it even as they point to possibilities beyond our current constructions' (Kuntz, 2015, p.26).

A note on language

It is worth noting from the outset the unique interpretation adopted in this thesis regarding some contested terminology:

LGBTQ+, as the most used and preferred initialism by the queer community (Smith, 2023), will be used to refer to gender/sexuality minorities throughout this thesis as an umbrella term. The expanded and more inclusive version encompasses LGBTQQIP2SAA, which stands for: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, pansexual, two spirit, asexual, and ally (Iovannone, 2018). However, unless we used Wainana's (in Matebeni & Msibi, 2015, p. 3) pronunciation of it as 'ligibit', the reader might find it difficult to keep a good flow of reading. For this reason, the word queer will be used interchangeably throughout this thesis, with the use of the initialism only where it is merited. It is important to highlight that I deliberately use queer as a term of celebration and liberation from its oppressive historical associations and use to shame gender/sexual diversity. This performative exercise (Butler, 1993) is a political act, but we must be careful about imposing labels to refer to LGBTQ+ individuals without their consent (World Health Organization, 2016).

Symbolic power builds on the Bordieusian interpretation I offered in 'queering habitus' (Morantes-Africano, 2023), where I argued that educators are in a position of influence and can use their practice to create inclusive spaces and practices. For the topics discussed in this thesis, this means that they have the power to affirm their students' gender identity, actively challenge injustices, and act to include more representation of voices traditionally silenced. Moreover, the act of championing the invisible helps to critically question their assumptions, values, and beliefs. In doing so educators should then act to address professional learning gaps that could disadvantage them and their students regarding inclusive practice.

Belonging as a theoretical perspective

Fricker (2014) starts her articulation of epistemic equality with a negative as a methodological approach. That is, by thinking first about injustice rather than justice, and inequality rather than equality, we can find ourselves in a position to evaluate where we are. This could result in an understanding of what else we might need to do to achieve those virtuous success terms. My work on belonging started like this when I first considered whether being LGBTQ+ could have any impact at all on students' educational journeys and outcomes. This means considering who may belong, as well as who might not and why. I also wondered about the role of teachers in this, and whether they are aware of the need for queer youth to connect with others, and to feel accepted, respected, and supported for who they are. This means not only acknowledging

belonging as a human need but paying attention to the impact that educators and the general educational environment could have on their sense of being and becoming. This did not pre-empt queerness as a vulnerability. Nonetheless, when reflecting on my observations of the various educational environments that I visit in my professional role as teacher educator, I have noticed marked differences in the 'vibe' that some environments give. Some places feel safer and more welcoming than others to exist as a queer individual.

For example, the art and design building of MyCampus is a jungle of identity expressions that, perhaps in itself, represents a safe space for youth to explore and nurture their talents. However, moving on to other vocational areas dominated by one gender, compounded with perceived unwelcoming atmospheres for those who may not fit in, complicates the notion of equal opportunities. Notably, having a place in a programme of study does not give an instantaneous sense of belonging. Feeling too different from others, underrepresented, or feeling unsupported could lead to students abandoning said 'opportunities' to study with that group of people or in that institution (Guglielmi, 2018). For this reason, my knowledge project seeks to interpret the experiences and perspectives of LGBTQ+ students. Particularly in relation to whether their identities have had any impact in their educational journeys, and how this could help us shape inclusive practices in education. The below explores key theories, frameworks and perspectives of belonging in education. Although none are specifically centred on the needs of LGBTQ+ students, these offer a starting point to make sense of how belonging has been conceptualised.

According to Goodenow (1993a, p. 80) students' sense of belonging or 'psychological membership in the school or classroom' means feeling 'personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment'. Concurring, Hagerty et al., (1992) defined it as the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an *integral* part of that system or environment. I place emphasis on the word integral to draw attention to an important aspect of belonging; it does not happen when we are temporary visitors but when have a deep connection. This connection can be to places, communities, fields of knowledge or practice, of online tribes, or any other social configuration where we are not only a member but where we feel the right to be an integral part of it (hooks, 2009). This means that having a student ID does not guarantee that our students will develop a sense of belonging. As Thomas (2012, p. 5) highlights in the context of higher

education, there are a combination of personal and external factors that could make it extra difficult for some students ‘to fully participate, integrate and feel like they belong in HE’. Their experience and educational outcomes can be adversely affected, something which I argue that this can happen across all educational contexts. Goodwin (2023) also observes that when young people find it hard to connect with others, they are more likely to experience barriers to their learning. In addition, they may grow feelings of loneliness, alienation and a negative sense of self (Goodwin, 2023). It is worth noting that education can still happen but the experience for some individuals could be transformed if we consider belonging as a fundamental human need and act to facilitate it.

Among the many definitions of belonging there are two strands: belongingness and sense of belonging. These can be summed up as 1) a fundamental human need, and 2) an experience that allows us to feel connected, accepted, respected and supported by others. As a need, it is characterised by an innate inter-relationality and co-dependence. As a feeling and a state of mind, ‘belonging is experienced when people are present, invited, welcomed, known, accepted, supported, cared for, befriended, needed, and loved’ (Carter, 2016, p. 171; Carter, Biggs & Boehm, 2016). This comprehensive characterisation of ten success criteria could be extremely useful for educational developers and policymakers designing inclusive approaches in education, especially where ‘success’ criteria is not overtly described (Schuelka, 2018).

A main challenge to articulate this in terms of success criteria is the subjective character of feelings. For example, on the subject of caring or feeling cared for, Fernandes (2022, p. 123) argues that ‘a person’s perceived caring actions may not be received as such’. This could apply to any of the other criteria, as aspects of being known, respected or befriended are more likely to be felt in small circles than across larger groups of people. Also, many teachers may work extremely hard behind the scenes to support their students, but if this is not perceived by them as such, there might be a dissonance between input and output. Here we start to see how the interplay between internal and external factors is complex, multilayered, contingent, and subjectively interpreted; defining and configuring ‘what it means to belong (and not belong)’ (Wright, 2015, p. 393).

The interplay between internal and external factors will be further explored in the discussion chapter of this thesis. For now, I return to Carter et al.'s (2016) work which shows how belonging transcends subjectivities and can be applied to other contexts, such as education. Whilst Carter et al.'s (2016) work originated around faith-based spaces and focused on the experiences and perspectives of families of individuals with learning difficulties and disabilities, it is still valuable in my context. Wheaton College (2023, para. 3) is used as another example of faith-based organisations interested in belonging. Wheaton College (2023) has taken these ten characterisations and developed them into five 'steps to relationships where everybody can flourish and thrive':

1. Choosing:
   People make a choice to be in relationship with each other. A relationship is mutual; both people must choose to engage. Both must be Present and feel Invited. The key indicator of this step is mutuality.
2. Investing:
   Once two people have chosen relationship, investing helps the sense of belonging grow. Typically, this means each person is intentionally Welcomed and Cared For in a way that honors their dignity and value. The key indicator of this step is engagement.
3. Yielding:
   Growing a relationship often requires sensitivity around the unique needs of an individual, especially a person with a disability. This yielding results in a deepening relationship, leading each person to feel Supported and Accepted. The key indicator of this step is relational depth.
4. Committing:
   As the relationship deepens, each person becomes more fully Known. When the relationship progresses to each person being Befriended, they feel a sense of safety that can foster appropriate relational intimacy. The key indicator of this step is safety.
5. Flourishing:
   One goal of a deep relationship is transformation, growth, peace, and wholeness. This type of flourishing only comes when each person feels Needed and ultimately Loved. This is true belonging, and the key indicator of this step is transformation.

When thinking about how the above relates to LGBTQ+ students, aspects of being and becoming are possible when having/experiencing the right conditions. One's sex/gender/sexuality should not deter our personal, academic, and/or professional goals. However, it is important to acknowledge how inhabiting particular social locations intersects and often mediates our 'power and influence' (Halse, 2018, p. 8). Thus, the relationship between structure and agency requires external objective conditions to realise what Maslow

(1943) called *self-actualisation*. This is demonstrated in the interplay between the subjective identities, personality traits, needs and motivations, which are situated within external conditions. In a theory of human motivation, Maslow (1954, p. 43) describes 'the belongingness and love needs' not as a definitive categorisation but more as an outline of the factors that make it salient:

> We know in a general way the destructive effects on children on moving too often; of disorientation; of the general over-mobility that is forced by industrialization; of being without roots, or of despising one's roots, one's origins, one's group; of being torn from one's home and family, and friends and neighbors; of being a transient or a newcomer rather than a native. We still underplay the deep importance of the neighborhood, of one's territory, of one's clan, of one's own "kind," one's class, one's gang, one's familiar working colleagues (pp. 43-44).

Our students need both roots and wings. They need structures and places to come back to and feel grounded, protected, and supported, but also opportunities to explore, learn about themselves and others, and opportunities to be and become. Considering belonging, a matter of justice ties in aspects of dignity too (Chartered Governance Institute, 2022). This means considering barriers that some queer students experience in education as part of the 'dignity distortions' (Cobb & Krownapple, 2019) that must be challenged and addressed in education. I place educators here as central to inclusive practice in education, in that they are part of the institutional apparatus. In essence, educators determine who gets to be in education, who is supported, who is welcomed and who is not. As Goodenow (1993a, p. 80) reminds us, students' engagement, academic effort, and success or failure 'are influenced not only by individual differences in skills, abilities, and predispositions, but also by many situational and contextual factors'. One of these is institutional support, which, as I have briefly outlined before, for LGBTQ+ students could mean that they can earn a place in a course. However, if they are not accepted, respected, and supported by their peers and teachers, their need and want to be there could be negatively impacted (UCAS, 2021).

For many, this could also mean that they never even attempt to belong in professions where they do not see themselves represented. One pertinent example is the case of the under-representation of women in STEM subjects (Colwell et al., 2020). It is worth reflecting not only about who is enrolled in our courses but also who is not, and what might be preventing them from being there. My argument to make belonging a core principle of inclusive initiatives

aligns to Carter's (2016, p. 170) notion of asterisks in faith-based spaces and practices in which discourse and practice might not be fully congruent:

> *•All are welcome (*except those whose behaviors or bodies diverge too much from prevailing norms);*
> *•Nobody is excluded (*except when resources, staff, or support seems limited); and*
> *•Everyone serves (*except those pre designated as the recipients of ministry efforts).*

The idea of 'all' being welcomed, except if one's behaviour is too different, closely aligns to the criticisms that queer theories have made about queerness only being tolerable in the closet (Sedgwick, 1990; Warner, 1993; Yep, 2002). This existing in the margins is not conducive to a sense of safety and belonging. As Singh (2018) asserts, belonging in education gives individuals a sense of comfort and of validation, and with that, they can take risks. I agree with this sentiment of education as a sacred and safe space to exist. Every single one of our students deserves our support, respect, and acceptance as a matter of human flourishing, regardless of their sex/gender/sexuality. Our social worthiness is largely determined by the interplay between a need to authentically represent ourselves without being compared to others whilst wanting and needing others' appraisal of our value (Pardede & Kovač, 2023). However, when LGBTQ+ individuals learn from an incredibly early age, not only that they are different, but that to belong they may need to compromise parts of their core identity to 'fit in,' their sense of self can conflict with their need to belong.

Because belonging involves our identities, interests, affiliations, and motivations, and these are not fixed but fluid, belonging is in a constant state of negotiation. Nonbinary and trans individuals are an example of this, and their educational opportunities and experiences should not be thwarted because of their new identities, gender expressions or use of pronouns. I make here the professional learning of gender a matter of priority to existing and future educators. My concern is rooted in the lack of individual and interpretive tools shown around the highly politicised gender identity and trans rights movements (Amnesty International, 2021; Government Equalities Office & Mordaunt, 2018; Hansford, 2023; Horton, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2023; Jones, 2020). I argue that there are clear knowledge gaps that need to be addressed as a matter of social justice.

My theorisation of belonging, which is further developed in the discussion chapter, builds on Allen et al.'s (2021) conceptual review of it. They synthesised it into four interrelated

components: competencies, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions (p. 87). At the individual level, this means how our identity, personality and need/desire to belong must be balanced with external opportunities and perceptions (value) from institutions for such belonging to be realised. In the context of education, this means considering how students need to feel connected at both the subjective and objective levels, internally and externally, because if somebody wants to study but is physically excluded from places of learning this creates a sense of 'unbelonging' (Singh, in University of the Arts London, 2020). This brings to education psychological and sociological dimensions where being LGBTQ+ may mean that they legally can access education but may never feel that they belong. As a result, impacting their lived experience *because of*, rather than *despite*, their differences. This wrestling of core aspects of queer identities, goals and aspirations against external sociocultural and political forces that enable and constrain their opportunities to be and become is what drives this project.

As a fundamental human need, belonging is gradually making its way into diversity and inclusion initiatives from both academic and corporate discourse (Academy to Innovate Human Resources, 2022). For Clarke (2019), whilst diversity is largely about numbers, and inclusion is about programmes and policies to attract and retain those numbers, belonging is about changing hearts and minds. In addition, belonging exists at the intersection of respect, community, and connectedness, and is fundamental for people to thrive (Clarke, 2019). My work aligns to this, positing belonging as part of human diversity, making it a relational need and a capability. An initial difficulty here is how to articulate belonging as a sense, a feeling, and a subject experience in a world of calculation, measurability, and value for money (Ball, 2003; 2016). Minorities deserve a positive learning experience, not because of satisfaction surveys but because they have value as humans. However, as White (2022) asserts, belonging is inconvenient, it requires commitment, accountability, and time. This, in education, means a process of negotiation, of becoming familiar with one another. Whether this be through bonding and group formation or where relationships form because of the time spent together, we develop a sense of belonging because of the way we are treated.

It is worth remembering that what makes belonging essential 'is the fact that we are a social species. We can't survive without one another' (Brown, 2014, p. 154). In understanding belonging as relational, we can see how it is inextricably linked to relationships and

interdependence. Belonging is driven by emotional and personal links, to places, to groups of people, to fields of knowledge and practice, and personal subjectivities. This interdependence means that 'we do not exist on our own, but because of and in connection with the systems in which we reside' (Kern et al., 2019, p. 709). As will be explored in the research design section, this 'inter-being' (Hanh, 1987) has significant implications for a knowledge project such as this. A queer onto-epistemology means an inter-relational existence and a unique knowing-as-being that can contribute to the individual and collective interpretive tools used to make sense of one another. In this way, the participants in this research are considered to have an epistemic privilege (Hartsock, 20013; Wiley, 2003) from their lived experience in education. This privilege is something which can help us elucidate what belonging could look like for queer individuals, which does not align to the concerns raised by Landau (2008) about epistemic privilege as another form of essentialism.

The inconvenience of the extra efforts needed to support belonging has to be seen as part of late modernity where educational practice is defined by complexity, contradiction, and ethical dilemmas (Duignan, 2018; Olson, 2008; Shukie & Sidebottom, 2024). We ought to embrace diversity and complexity not as chaos but as a plethora of orders (Grosz, 2008). For example, the topic of gender identity and its fluidity could place teachers 'between a hard place and a hard place' (Davies & Heyward, 2019). As educators, they are in the middle of public and organisational policy, stakeholders' needs and expectations, public scrutiny, and the needs of their students. I would reinforce again how belonging is about inter-relationality; we need each other to realise a sense of belonging. This means that teachers, students, and institutions must work collaboratively to build the conditions for inclusive practice.

A potential threat to valuing belonging in education is globalisation. Carolissen (2012, p. 632) argues that neoliberal globalisation brings marketisation, individualism and competition that 'excludes interdependency, collaboration and social sharing as a valid and desirable practice in society'. However, whilst traditional sources of connection such as communities and cultures could be disrupted by globalisation, other opportunities might open, such as popular media (Vázquez-Rodríguez et al., 2021), a queer existence in digital networks of everyday practice (Haber, 2016), and online platforms for us to find our 'communities and relationships of choice' (Friedman, 1989). I would still insist that these types of communities could be helpful for hobbies and interests, yet personal, academic, and professional formation need a balance.

This balance may be found between our personal traits, needs and desires to belong, with external opportunities and support. I place here educators as pivotal in supporting this.

From my experience as a teacher educator, a vast majority of teachers are driven by a desire to help their students, to share, to nurture, to guide and support. What concerns me is how a lack of interpretive tools to make sense of their students' needs might place them as oppressors that reproduce inequalities unknowingly. This becomes more alarming when considered in the context of students with emerging fluid gender identities and expressions which I argue as a matter of justice. I discuss below Miranda Fricker's (2007) theory of epistemic injustices to make a case that without understanding this, belonging for LGBTQ+ individuals may not move beyond an ideal.

Epistemic injustices

Fricker (2007) defines epistemic injustice as a wrong done to someone in their capacity as a knower. She proposes an epistemology that goes beyond knowledge for knowledge's sake. Instead, Fricker advocates for a type of knowledge that could 'morally awaken a knowing subject and which can hopefully influence or bring forth a collective social and political change' (Mansueto, 2022, p. 55). Fricker (2007) classifies epistemic injustices into two types: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice happens when a person's credibility is lowered due to prejudice. We see this in cases of women reporting being the victims of sexual violence but the police not believing them (Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2022), or the prejudice experienced when people assume that emotionality hinders testimonial credibility (Díaz & Almagro, 2019). In both cases their accounts of the experience are not given enough credibility. In education, teachers regularly experience tensions and ethical dilemmas (Davies & Heyward, 2019). For example, when believing their students might be against policy expectations of only trusting hard evidence. This affects the students' credibility, for example when mitigating circumstances affect their attendance or ability to meet deadlines such as mental health issues (Department for Education, 2023a). Another could be the mistrust fostered by using online systems to detect plagiarism (Bayne et al., 2020; Kendrix, 2023).

The second type, hermeneutical injustice, precedes testimonial injustice and manifests 'when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes

to making sense of their social experiences' (Fricker, 2007, p. 1). Although Fricker (2007) focuses on those experiencing the injustice, I extend her interpretation of injustice to those who may be misjudging situations due to a lack of awareness of others' lived experience. As outlined in the rationale, Dyslexia and left-handedness are examples of a lack of collective interpretive or communicative tools to make sense of the phenomena we experience. This meant that teachers' practice may be ineffective to address specific needs, while the students were also unable to articulate their experience. Although Fricker (2007) would focus in this case on the student as the main victim of injustice, I extend this to teachers, as they are disadvantaged by a lack of awareness too. Central to this thesis, I argue that the subject of gender is becoming a type of new knowledge of which a considerable proportion of the population may not be aware. If unaddressed, it could hinder the projects of inclusion and belonging for non-conformists of heteronormative expectations. In this way, both the students who may be experiencing what has been wrongly labelled 'rapid-onset gender dysphoria' (Ashley, 2020) and their parents or teachers may be at a disadvantage due to the epistemic gap between them.

We are becoming more aware of hermeneutical injustices through recent social movements such as #MeToo and #YoSiTeCreo (Rekers, 2022), as well as #BlackLivesMatter [BLM] (Black Lives Matter, 2023). In both cases, that is, of sexism and racism, there are clear collective knowledge gaps that need to be addressed. In the former, the notion of consent has helped us understand why there is no justification behind nonconsensual relations. In the latter, how the racialization of individuals sustains the discourse and practice of treating others unequally based on perceived racial characteristics. Both perpetrators and victims of these practices are part of epistemic injustices due to lack of interpretive or communicative tools. In the words of Wittgenstein (1961), the limits of my language could mean the limits of my world. Hermeneutical injustices are central to a type of education needed for social practice. In the case of racism and white supremacy, these are culturally entrenched in many parts of the world and ought to be dismantled. However, as seen by the response from many around Black Lives Matter, with the unquestionable logic of All Lives Matter, this forced a further clarification of 'Black Lives Matter, too' (Atkins, 2018), exposing unawareness of racism. In many cases this stems from unacknowledged privileges and/or lack of a lived experience of racism. A central argument here is that epistemic injustices ought to be considered more than an oversight or an inconvenience.

An example central to my research is the apparent unintelligibility of non-binary or genderqueer people in social practice (Harding, 2023). In many cases this results in queer people having to hide their identity for fear of discrimination (Boncori & O'Shea, 2019). The same applies to trans individuals who may understand their identity very well but must keep negotiating the meaning of their experience with others who cannot comprehend it due to a lack of awareness. In this way, my work focuses on this second type of injustice, as I argue that heteronormativity is a type of hermeneutical injustice that affects everybody. By acknowledging that we all need to learn about the complex, intersectional and inherently diverse nature of gender/sexuality, we can take small but important steps to stop aggravating each other due to ignorance. This is particularly poignant in education, a place where children and young people are supposed to be nurtured and grow. Yet as will be explored in the literature review, the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals continue to be challenging, and teachers are under pressure to meet the needs and expectations of many stakeholders. Neoliberal agendas of managerialism and performativity, driven by the logic of the market (Ball, 2003; 2016), pose a significant threat to justify belonging as an educational aim and a matter of social justice. However, educators regularly demonstrate how their work is more aligned to artistry than to formulaic routines (King et al., 2025), meaning that if they identify barriers to their students' belonging, they can mobilise their symbolic power to tackle inequalities.

In highlighting epistemic injustices, I argue that there is a clear need to develop interpretive tools to understand complex social phenomena, and education is able to help with this. For example, the logic of 'all lives matter' does not acknowledge the notion of proportionality, a useful conceptual tool that could help us analyse, evaluate, and justify appropriate interventions to level the playing field for disadvantaged individuals. For instance, proportionality related to the Black Lives Matter movement means that we are not denying that all lives matter, but that right now black lives need extra attention. The same applies to victims of gender-based violence, and gender/sexual minorities among other protected characteristics (Equality Act, 2010; Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2016, 2021). I argue these people deserve extra attention to advance social justice with the belief that gaining equal rights for those currently disadvantaged does not inherently mean fewer rights for others. It is also important

not to confuse proportionality as ratios of representation related to tokenistic approaches to perform inclusion in the workplace (Davis, 2021). To do so would largely fail to address systemic barriers to minorities belonging and thriving.

In the case of the emergence of gender diversity, non-binary and genderqueer pronouns, trans-gender and trans-sexual individuals, there is an emergent need for teachers to learn about gender diversity to make their practice more inclusive (Booth & Goodier, 2023; Stonewall, 2020). In most cases of hermeneutic injustice, the victim is unable to put their point across, not because it is invalid, but because the hearer does not have the interpretive tools to comprehend them. In this way, both are trapped in a disadvantageous situation. I have witnessed this with educators who do not understand non-binary or trans students. This resonates with the case study of the Maths teacher being sanctioned for misgendering and deadnaming a trans student (Minchin, 2014). Not addressing this as a matter of professional learning could result in educators being ill prepared to support their students.

However, I would argue that we must be compassionate towards each other when it comes to understanding why many educators may struggle with non-heteronormative identities and expressions, especially if this has not been part of their professional learning or immediate social life. Yet they have the power to influence the student experience and outcomes. As I have argued elsewhere, a heteronormative habitus harms everybody, because 'both the moral judge and the judged are trapped in an unexamined discourse of gender and sexual norms' (Morantes-Africano, 2023, p. 247), further entrenching divisions of 'woke' versus those who appear indifferent, apathetic, or fixed in their own ways to understand diversity in human nature. A main concern here, related to inclusion and belonging, is how educators could affect, knowingly or otherwise, the experience and outcomes of their students owing to 'structural prejudice in the economy of collective hermeneutical resources' (Fricker, 2007, p. 1). Not believing somebody's truth is different from rejecting it out of prejudice.

Based on the above, the notion of 'lived experience' will be central to the type of 'data' used in the co-constructed accounts of knowledge presented in this research. The main point to highlight here is a need to develop a type of learning and an awareness of the complexity of human experience from the standpoint of minorities (Bailey, 2021). For this, we need to share stories to enrich our understanding of how others navigate life. This is particularly important in

education where teachers encounter a vast range of student demographics, needs and motivations. Yet, the expectation is to include and support all with little extra support, limited resources (Stonewall, 2020; Swanson & Gettinger, 2016), and as I argue in this thesis, limited learning regarding gender theory. These factors make inclusive practice complex; belonging offers valuable theoretical tools to enhance the student experience for the wider student population. Regarding queer individuals, a main concern is that we cannot use ignorance as the excuse to continue condoning gender inequalities, or the othering of queer people in social practice.

The unintelligibility of non-binary and trans identities can be bridged with some education, otherwise this could continue putting both teachers and students in a disadvantageous position. We all need not only interpretive tools to understand both our differences and our shared humanity, but also because this has to be driven as a matter of justice. Without understanding that belonging is not an abstract concept but an existential human need, LGBTQ+ students and their teachers will continue experiencing hermeneutical injustices. Conceptual resources are needed to make sense of our experience; affirming spaces and practices are important for queer youth and their sense of belonging not only in the classroom but in the world. This is particularly important in their formative years where identity formation is never linear but complex, layered, and inevitably intersectional. Our gender/sexuality exists within a myriad of sociocultural and political conditions, expectations, and possibilities. One of such possibilities is that of belonging regardless of one's gender/sexuality. However, more work needs to be done for all stakeholders in education. By doing so we allow educators to be aware of the impact of knowledge gaps that put teachers at a disadvantage when trying to support queer youth.

Chapter two: Literature review

This chapter explores both experiences and perspectives related to LGBTQ+ students. It starts with similar projects, which shows how the topic has been widely explored and how some research uses similar methods to mine. However, in using standpoint epistemologies to articulate nuances related to inclusive educational practice, my work offers a unique contribution to the fields of knowledge and practice of LGBTQ+ studies, queer theory, and initial teacher education.

Next is an outline of the main UK policies and legislation related to equality, diversity, inclusion and belonging, which must be considered as part of the external drivers of current educational practice. These two initial sections are followed by theoretical and critical perspectives of heteronormativity, gender, and identity and personality as conceptual perspectives informing this thesis. The concluding section highlights the impact of the challenging experiences that LGBTQ+ individuals face on their mental health and wellbeing.

Similar projects

This section summarises some of the research available regarding LGBTQ+ individuals' experiences in social practice, including educational environments. Starting with research situated in schools, Snapp et al.'s (2015) work adopts a new research paradigm that moves away from categorising queer youth as either 'resilient' or 'at-risk' (p. 250) to one that posits their experience as complex and multilayered. A key finding of their work, which is highly relevant to my work, is the critical interrogation of attempts to bring an LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum to schools, particularly in calling attention to the impact of teachers not intervening in LGBTQ+ bullying, or missing 'teachable moments' related to this for all pupils (p. 249). Such work highlights how more needs to be done to tackle issues of oppression that sustain inequalities. Aligned to this literature, and a main argument that underpins my thesis, is redefining the idea that injustices related to asymmetric positionings of queer individuals in society are due to a misfortune. Moreover, this redefinition reaffirms my curiosity about the role that education and teacher education could play in helping this to widen the participation of underrepresented groups in further and higher education (Duckworth, 2016; Trotman, 2023) to reconfigure this. We must acknowledge that these are human created and sustained by

hegemonic sociocultural and historical factors that can and should be changed. As Shklar (1990, p. 15) reminds us, 'it will always be easier to see misfortune rather than injustice in the afflictions of other people. Only the victims occasionally do not share the inclination to do so'.

In terms of studies exploring the transition from school to post-compulsory education, a significant example that inspired my research design is Glazzard et al.'s (2020) study. The study focused on the lived experiences of five LGBTQ+ students in the transitions into and through higher education in UK universities. As a qualitative research project, it uses semi-structured interviews, audio diaries and visual methods to apply Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions Theory (MMT) to posit complexity as a theoretical framework. This approach closely aligns to the postmodern criticality that my project adopts too. Glazzard et al.'s (2020) work contrasts to the predominantly tragic narratives that most LGBTQ+ research reports. Instead, it seeks to explore positive experiences and agentic ways in which participants navigate their transitions into higher education. Similarly, Edwards et al., (2023, p. 2) are critical of deficit-based approaches to researching queer lives which fail to underline ways in which 'communities survive and thrive in the face of adversity'. Their work uses a constructivist grounded theory approach and qualitative methods to identify what brings their participants joy about their gender/sexuality identities. Vaccaro and Newman (2016, p. 137) also use grounded theory methods to interpret 'first-year LGBPQ students' sense of belonging'. I found useful that the title of their paper's signals to the reader who specifically took part in the research: lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual and queer students. These three pieces of research highlight the need for qualitative researchers to be transparent about their biases, assumptions, and the starting points of their research intentions. Also, how the lives of queer individuals are complex and can be examples of resilience.

University College London's (2022) research involving twenty-nine LGBTQ+ individuals from ethnic minorities in the UK reports challenges related to both racism and rejection because of their sexual orientation. A main concern recorded in this research is the impact on participants' health and wellbeing. For example, twenty-two of the participants report experiencing racism from within the LGBTQ+ community as well as wider society. Twenty-six also mentioned anxiety and depression as the main mental health issues regularly experienced by them. Similarly, Neves and Hillman's (2017, p. 46) research on mental health

highlights ‘a striking difference in wellbeing levels’ between straight and queer counterparts. Overall, a salient theme in the literature available regarding the experience of queer individuals in social practice is the effect that hostility and rejection have on their mental health, leading to trauma, anxiety and depression (Clayton, 2020; Cochran et al., 2014; Elliott, 2021; Puckett et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2011; UCAS & Stonewall, 2021). As this project is focused on belonging, a main concern here for queer individuals is how a lived experience of not feeling accepted, respected, supported, and/or valued can have long lasting effects on their mental health. If there is a perceived or factual absence of places to feel safe and be part of a community, a queer existence is one where only a partial and curated aspect of one’s identity can be shared with others. The liminality of queer existence in places and communities (March, 2020; Xu, 2023) is particularly important for queer youth transitioning from compulsory to further and higher education, which is the context where this research takes place. We must also consider the impact that Covid-19 had on the mental health of youth. LGBT HERO (2020, para. 3) report that ‘almost four in five (79%) LGBTQ+ people said that their mental health had been negatively impacted by the coronavirus lockdown.

Regarding scholarly work combining both the topic of LGBTQ+ individuals’ experiences, and qualitative approaches such as semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019; 2021), Town et al.’s (2021) research is closely aligned to the methodological choices I made for this inquiry. My adoption of a constructionist paradigm favours a socially constructed view of a queer onto-epistemology, in that who we are and what we learn about ourselves and others is largely defined inter-relationally. This perspective, which is aligned to a rejection of essentialist claims for gender and sexuality (Butler, 1990, 1993, 2004a; Epstein, 1994; Samuel, 2013; Seal, 2019; Sedgwick, 1990), offers critical insights. They prompt us to question the way we treat one another based on partial and outdated understandings of the complexity of gender-sex-sexuality outside of the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990). It agrees with Alaimo (2016, p. 6) that ‘the world is not only more queer than one would have imagined, but also more surprisingly itself’. It is necessary to disrupt any of the alienating practices that thwart a sense of belonging for those who are too different from the norm. As highlighted by Carter (2020) in their discussion of ‘asterisks’ related to the discourse of inclusion in faith-based practice, the theory and the practice might not always

align. This may be due to not all individuals truly feeling that they belong as exceptions to the norm.

A queer existence is challenging for many because of the way that others perceive and treat them. In their qualitative study of bullying of lesbian and gay youth, Mishna et al., (2008, p. 1598) report 'pervasiveness across their social ecology and risks to coming-out; sexual prejudice in the media, and "conversion bullying"' as the main factors attributed to the bullying that social service providers witness at the interactions between queer and non-queer youth. As highlighted in the previous chapter, hermeneutical injustices caused by a lack of collective interpretive tools (Fricker, 2007) are a main concern of this project. We must act to stop aggravating each other due to a heteronormative habitus (Morantes-Africano, 2023) that results in symbolic or other forms of violence. I argue that many of the challenges that queer people experience in their life can be prevented with more information and education available for all. There is power in the 'ordinary practices of everyday life' (Braidotti, 2006, p. 278). For this reason, my work builds on the important educational research that organisations such as Stonewall (2023b) in the UK, and the Trevor Project (2024) and the Pew Research Centre (2013) in the US have been building. This work continues to raise awareness of the issues and challenges that queer individuals face. Their work and mine share a similar ethos. That is, tackling issues of inequality and injustice through solidarity, educational campaigns, targeted advocacy (Velasco, 2018), and by offering queer individuals a place and a community to belong to. We all acknowledge that queer existence is an act of resistance.

Policy and legislation related to Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging

In the UK, the Equality Act (2010) identifies nine protected characteristics against which discrimination is prohibited:

1. Age
2. Disability
3. Gender reassignment
4. Marriage and civil partnership (in employment only)
5. Pregnancy and maternity
6. Race
7. Religion or belief

8. Sex
9. Sexual orientation

Discrimination can occur in various forms, including direct discrimination, indirect discrimination, harassment, and victimisation. From the above, the three most relevant characteristics relevant to my research participants' intersectionality are 1) gender reassignment, 2) sex, and 3) sexual orientation. The Equality Act (2010, chapter 1) further clarifies how the protections apply:

> 1) Gender reassignment
>
> A person has the protected characteristic of gender reassignment if the person is proposing to undergo, is undergoing, or has undergone a process (or part of a process) for the purpose of reassigning the person's sex by changing physiological or other attributes of sex.
>
> > A reference to a transsexual person is a reference to a person who has the protected characteristic of gender reassignment.
>
> In relation to the protected characteristic of gender reassignment—
>
> > a reference to a person who has a particular protected characteristic is a reference to a transsexual person;
> >
> > a reference to persons who share a protected characteristic is a reference to transsexual persons.
>
> 2) Sex
>
> In relation to the protected characteristic of sex—
>
> > a reference to a person who has a particular protected characteristic is a reference to a man or to a woman;
> >
> > a reference to persons who share a protected characteristic is a reference to persons of the same sex.
>
> 3) Sexual orientation
>
> Sexual orientation means a person's sexual orientation towards—
>
> > persons of the same sex,
> >
> > persons of the opposite sex, or
> >
> > persons of either sex.
>
> In relation to the protected characteristic of sexual orientation—
>
> > a reference to a person who has a particular protected characteristic is a reference to a person who is of a particular sexual orientation;
> >
> > a reference to persons who share a protected characteristic is a reference to persons who are of the same sexual orientation.

For this knowledge project, the above means that LGBTQ+ individuals have the right to access education without being discriminated against on the grounds of their gender reassignment, sex, or sexual orientation. However, my work complicates the notion of equal opportunities, because merely accessing education does not mean that their peers and/or teachers will accept, respect, support, and value them—all of which are key conditions to develop a sense of belonging. I ask education and educators to consider how at the intersection of theories of belonging, and the learning from a queer onto-epistemology, we could further our understanding. Essentially highlighting where our own knowledge gaps could be preventing making LGBTQ+ individuals part of inclusive initiatives.

It is important to differentiate here two different dimensions of equality, diversity and inclusion initiatives: compliance and promotion. The former relates to the Public Sector Equality Duty (Gov.UK, 2023, para. 4) in which public authorities and other bodies carrying out public functions must ensure that they consider how their functions affect people with different protected characteristics:

> These functions include their policies, programmes, and services. The duty supports good decision-making by helping decision-makers understand how their activities affect different people. It also requires public bodies to monitor the actual impact of the things they do. For example, to keep under review how different groups of pupils are performing at school and to identify and take action if some pupils with protected characteristics need more support than others.

The second aspect, promotion, is not mandatory by law, meaning that institutions normally respond by mobilising resources and creating dedicated Equality and Diversity Leads within educational settings. However, as Cuthbert et al. (2022, p. 765) assert, there is a wealth of critical literature interrogating 'the ways in which equality and diversity is "done" – or, more accurately, "performed" – within educational institutions'. An example of this is tokenism, where good intentioned but poorly informed attempts to display equality, diversity and inclusion means including that *other* minoritised individual in public facing displays. However, as Canas (2017, para. 15) advises, quotas do nothing if we are simply introducing or expecting minorities to exist 'within the same colonial structural terms of enunciation'. This means affording access to be part of a system but offering no support to carve spaces to fully belong

and feel integrally part of it. Such tension is part of what my project tries to address by raising awareness through the onto-epistemologies of queer individuals.

As I have articulated elsewhere, to ensure compliance with public policy, technologies of accountability are routinely put in place (Morantes-Africano, 2021). In the case of the two aspects of the Equality Act (2010), compliance and promotion, Ofsted has been a key component of the state's apparatus to control and regulate policy implementation. Traditionally this is achieved via inspections, including initial teacher education provision (Ofsted, 2023c, 2023d); for example, the Equality Act's (2010) requirement that all public bodies publish equalities objectives every 4 years. One of Ofsted's (2023c) equality objectives 2020-2022 is to 'give due regard to equality, diversity and inclusion during inspection and regulation and in its research and evaluation work' (para. 6).

For educational institutions such as MyCampus where this research took place, and where I work as teacher educator, this means that inspectors assess compliance 'with their relevant duties under the Equality Act 2010 and, where applicable, the extent to which they promote British values and promote equality and diversity' (para. 7). My critique of the Prevent Duty (Morantes-Africano, 2021) applauds the policy as a proactive strategy. However, the imposition on educators of a duty to promote British values through a set of 'vaguely defined and taken-for-granted values, has mostly fostered confusion and an ill prepared army of educators on how to use them in the classroom' (p. 76). I suggested instead that British values must be contextualised as part of civic education, and that it would also be beneficial to untangle them from safeguarding policy. Similarly, when policy asks educators to promote equality and diversity without context or appropriate professional learning for those enacting it, it can result in performativity and fabrications to show compliance (Ball, 2003).

Returning to Ofsted's inspections, their latest iteration of the Education Inspection Framework (Ofsted, 2023a) states that under personal development, inspectors judge,

- promoting equality of opportunity so that all learners can thrive together, understanding that difference is a positive, not a negative, and that individual characteristics make people unique
- promoting an inclusive environment that meets the needs of all learners, irrespective of age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex or sexual orientation, relationship status or pregnancy

From professional experience, the topics of equality, diversity and inclusion are approached more as a rhetoric than as a practice. This means that many of the assignments and academic tasks that teachers in training need to complete under professional standards for teachers (Education and Training Foundation, 2022; Institute for Apprentices and Technical Education, 2024) result in awareness of how 'all' are to be included, supported, and not discriminated against. However, specific examples given as case studies to illustrate efforts made to go the extra mile for those who need it the most, are rarely included. This does not mean that inclusive practice does not occur. As reported by Ofsted (2023b), the overall performance of colleges is positive. Their data includes 214 colleges: 157 general FE colleges, 44 sixth-form colleges and 13 specialist FE colleges.

> This year, we inspected 64 colleges, of which 78% were judged good or outstanding. Ten colleges improved from requires improvement to good, and 6 declined from good to requires improvement.
>
> As at 31 August 2023, 92% of colleges were judged good or outstanding at their most recent inspection. This includes general FE colleges, sixth-form colleges and specialist FE colleges, of which 91%, 100% and 85% respectively were judged good or outstanding (Ofsted, 2023b).

From an international perspective, the United Nations (2024, para. 2) highlights how LGBTQI+ people are discriminated against 'in the labour market, in schools and in hospitals, mistreated and disowned by their own families. They are singled out for physical attack – beaten, sexually assaulted, tortured and killed'. Moreover, this discrimination and hate-motivated violence is 'widespread, brutal, and often perpetrated with impunity, and it is even worse for those belonging to racialized communities. They are also victims of torture and ill treatment, including in custody, clinics and hospitals' (para. 3). This happens across the globe; however, the situation is even more alarming in 77 countries where discriminatory laws criminalise same sex-relationships, thus 'exposing individuals to the risk of arrest, prosecution, imprisonment — even, in at least five countries, the death penalty' (para. 4). Mbaye (2019) also reports the repression of same sex sexuality in Senegal, ahighly politicised topic of contestation.

Education is a powerful practice to continue fighting against such injustice. A main concern, however, is the way some media communicate Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and/or Belonging. This is important to this project because it heavily influences people's understanding and responses to policies and initiatives related to supporting marginalised or minoritised individuals or groups of people. As Canas (2017) asserts, diversity is a white word, or as Hage (1998) describes it, a 'white concept'. Canas (2017, para. 2) also asserts that diversity as a discourse 'seeks to make sense, through the white lens, of difference by creating, curating, and demanding palatable definitions of "diversity" but only in relation to what this means in terms of whiteness'.

A recent example can be found in the 2024 United States presidential election. For example, when Gasparino (2024), writing for the New York Post writes 'America may soon be subjected to the country's first DEI president: Kamala Harris', there is an unequivocal attempt to communicate Diversity, Equality and Inclusion as something to be subjected to rather than a positive human action to advance the projects of democracy and social justice. Polgreen (2024, para. 2) responds to this with an analysis of how this type of discourse clearly implied 'that a Black woman got power because of racial preferences. Black achievement, in this narrative, is always unearned and conferred without regard to merit'. Concurring, McFadden (2024, paras. 20-21) analyses how DEI has been used by Kamala's opposition as an ideology to be wary of. For example, he reports how the head of the Connecticut Republican Party, Ben Proto, claimed that,

> "Kamala Harris was chosen for a reason and it had absolutely nothing to do with her ability to be the next president of the United States, to be the vice president of the United States. It was clearly gender and racial politics that were put in play by the Democrats, and as a result they have a person sitting a heartbeat away from the presidency who really is not capable of serving in that role."

Similarly,

> Sebastian Gorka, a former aide to Donald Trump, recently referred to the vice president as "coloured" and a "DEI hire." during an appearance on conservative news channel Newsmax, [h]e said: "She's a DEI hire, right? She's a woman. She's coloured, therefore she's got to be good." (paras. 22-23).

Even though policy and legislation are different from politics, the subject at hand does need to bring perspectives on how the lives of minoritised individuals are being portrayed publicly, because whoever controls the narrative can profit from it (Morantes-Africano, 2021). Concerningly, the Human Rights Campaign (2024, para. 1) reports that in the US in 2023 at least 32 transgender and gender-expansive people's lives have been tragically and inhumanely taken through violent means, including through gun and interpersonal violence: '84% of victims were people of color, 50% were Black transgender women, 78% were killed with a gun, 36% of victims with a known killer were killed by a romantic/sexual partner, friend, or family member [and] 50% were misgendered or deadnamed by authorities or the press'. These deaths are part of my concern regarding a politics of inclusion that selectively mourns some lives over others.

Educators must be critical not only of discourse but also of how this influences their own practice. Diversity means decolonising a curriculum that has been carefully curated to maintain the status quo (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). It also means embracing the discomfort of knowing that there are injustices. As Arao and Clemens (2013, p. 139) suggest, authentic learning about social justice often requires the very qualities of risk, difficulty, and controversy that are defined as incompatible with safety. It is also crucial that educators do not read diversity as 'the inclusion of people who look different' (Puwar, 2004, p. 1).

Heteronormativity

Gender and queer studies in the 1990s gave rise to the notion of heteronormativity by questioning hegemonic ideas regarding heterosexuality as the natural, given, normal and preferred mode of sexual orientation (Rasmussen, 2017; Seal, 2019, 2020; Warner, 1993; Wittig, 1981). Around this time, similar notions were being used, with Sedgwick's (1990) heterosexism, Judith Butler's (1990) heterosexual matrix, and compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980) all trying to describe the same phenomenon. Its insidious nature means that socially constructed gender/sexuality norms are internalised by individuals to the point where they become a form of grammar for social interaction, limiting, oppressing, and causing harm to the self and others as both gender and sexuality are complex and multilayered rather than neatly defined, fixed and therefore immutable. Taking Lather's (1991, p. 2) conceptualisation

of ideology ‘as the stories a culture tells itself about itself’, my work puts human agency at the forefront of social change. Heteronormativity is a harmful ideology that can and needs to be questioned to stop queer lives being perceived as ‘pathological, deviant, invisible, unintelligible, or written out of existence’ (Yep, 2002, p. 167). Heteronormativity is by its very definition exclusionary of gender/sexual difference, therefore it poses a systemic threat for queer individuals to fully belong in social spaces and practices. Questioning ideology, invites a critical interrogation of our thinking (Riley, Robson & Evans, 2021). We must consider whether we are thinking and reproducing the culture’s thoughts, or any form of received discourse that sustains the discrimination that many queer people experience in social life (Stafford, 2018; Staples, 2019).

Marchia and Sommer (2017) provide a useful synthesis of the many interpretations of heteronormativity through four distinct categorisations: 1) heterosexist-heteronormativity, 2) gendered-heteronormativity, 3) hegemonic-heteronormativity, and 4) cisnormative-heteronormativity. Related to the first, Herek (1990, p. 316) highlights how heterosexism is an ideology that ‘denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, or community’. Donelson and Rogers (2004, p. 128) align to this view of heterosexism as the ‘organizational structures in society that support heterosexuality as normal and everything else as deviant’. These two characterisations of heterosexism highlight how queer individuals might not be valued due to their nonalignment to heteronormative expectations.

Regarding the second type, gendered-heteronormativity can be illustrated through Butler’s (1994) heterosexual matrix, or the tripartite sex-gender-sexuality. This is the idea that sex is evident through biology, whereas gender and sexuality are internal, therefore leading the viewer to assume these two (Tredway, 2014). This means that a heteronormative view of women assumes them as feminine and heterosexual, and men as masculine and heterosexual. Any other configuration often being considered by many as unnatural and not belonging to the ‘regimes of the normal’ (Warner, 1993). Individuals who present a gender identity that is not consistent with their apparent biological sex would under this definition be victims of general homophobia (Fraïssé & Barrientos, 2016, p. e66). A key reflection here related to belonging is how a gendered heteronormativity constricts people into binary categories of masculine or

feminine, essentially locking them into expected behaviours and performances that many may not feel natural to them, as is the case of non-binary or trans individuals.

In relation to hegemonic-heteronormativity, Davies (2012) reminds us how homophobia intersects with relations of domination such as racism, sexism, and class conflict, which pertain not only to queer people but to all members of society. Any dominant belief influencing the lay normativity and morality (Sayer, 2004) of individuals judging right or wrong gender/sexuality identities and expression, brings internal conflicts and contractions that apply to all, not only LGBTQ+ individuals. From experience, when people try to convert queer individuals to heterosexuality (Ban Conversion Therapy, 2024) or consider it a choice rather than one's nature, their internal conflict might come from a place of care. However, and in using hermeneutical injustices here (Fricker, 2007; 2014), I argue that what we have is a lack of collective interpretive tools. In fact, these tools are needed to understand which parts of our identity are flexible and can be changed, versus those who are part of our nature (Solomon, 2014) and therefore need to be honoured.

To illustrate the above, Tadele's (2011, p. 457) study of men who have sex with men in Ethiopia, reports that heteronormative masculinity results in men who have sex with men 'dealing with a number of issues of personal conflict and contradiction resulting in uncertainty, resentment, ambivalence, worry and discomfort'. Moreover, and in relation to lay morality, they argue that the sexual bodies of these men may not perhaps be even considered theirs but rather '"belong" to parents, families and to society at large' (p. 457). In this way, it could be argued that socially constructed expectations of gender/sexuality identities and expressions make our bodies a public domain, calling for many to chastise non-heteronormativity as undesirable in social practice. Thepsourinthone et al. (2020, p. 54) also explored the relationship between internalised homophobia and perceptions of masculinity in Australian men. They reported how 'conformity to masculine norms and threats to masculinity contingency were stronger predictors of internalized homophobia over and above demographic and other factors'. I consider homophobia, transphobia, and general negative dispositions towards queerness a matter of hermeneutical injustice, as a heteronormative habitus (Morantes-Africano, 2023) affect all social actors. Education with learning at the core of its functions, has a moral duty to dispel myths and turn our gaze towards recognising the nature of gender/sexuality as diverse rather than binary (Clark, 2010).

Hegemonic heteronormativity perhaps encompasses many of the issues explored in this thesis, as symbolic domination depends on a specific type of learning where the internalisation of the dominant view naturalises systems of classification that justify unequal distributions of rights and opportunities (Samuel, 2013, p. 410). In queering habitus (Morantes-Africano, 2023), I explored the moral dimension of hegemonic heteronormativity by arguing that many of the inequalities faced by LGBTQ+ individuals stem from a normative discourse that if left unexamined can continue to reproduce them. For this I adapted from Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) the notions of habitus, symbolic power, and symbolic violence, to illustrate how processes of early socialisation regarding gender identity and performance start to create a habitus that structures our dispositions towards right and wrong gender/sexuality. For many, this is imposed by those with the symbolic power to influence our thinking, meaning that socially constructed gender/sexuality norms (Samuel, 2013) result in the internalising of the culture's thoughts, and any deviation from it could result in internal moral conflicts. This is evident in Franklin's (1998, p. 7) research, where 'gay bashing', or the brutal violence exercised on gender non-conformists or visibly queer individuals, was conceptualised as 'a learned form of social control of deviance rather than a defensive response to personal threat'. As Bourdieu (1990, p. 81) suggests, 'the habitus is precisely this immanent law, lex insita, laid down in each agent by his earliest upbringing, which is the precondition not only for the co-ordination of practices but also for practices of co-ordination'.

The last type, cisnormative-heteronormativity, will be discussed in the gender section of this literature review, focusing on the 'unbelonging' (Singh, 2018) that many trans and non-binary individuals experience as they exist in liminal categories of gender. This means that social spaces and practices that are gendered, such as competitive sports (Anderson et al., 2021; ESPN, 2021), or shared toilets can become problematic. To close this section of heteronormativity, I use Foucault's (1977) suggestion that an essential political problem for us to grapple with is the need to not only criticise ideology, but to remember that it is possible to constitute new politics of truth. Moreover, 'the problem is not one of changing people's "consciousness" or what's in their heads; but the political, economic, institutional regime of the production of truth' (Foucault, 1977, p.14). This thesis shares this ethos. It does not aim to replace one ideology with another, but to instigate a critical engagement with our values and beliefs system.

Gender

Judith Butler (2023), as a prominent gender theorist, suggests that everybody has a theory of gender, meaning that we all have assumptions about what gender is or should be. My work adopts a critical stance to invite all social actors to question where those assumptions may come from. In queering habitus (Morantes-Africano, 2023) I argued how early socialisation, and the feedback that we receive from those around us when appraising our gender performance, determine our initial understanding that there are rights and wrongs when it comes to expressing ourselves. This habitus, as structuring structures, results in long lasting dispositions that guide our thoughts and actions (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). I extended this as a form of 'lay morality' (Sayer, 2004, 2005) which underpins my concern around the epistemic injustices central to my work around gender/sexuality. A limited understanding of it, or the insistence of essentialist views of how it appears in nature, can lead to inequalities, thus becoming a barrier for inclusion and belonging.

As previously discussed, a heteronormative habitus comes to exist through what Butler (1990) defined as the 'heterosexual matrix' which functions as a framework to expect the alignment between sex, gender, and sexuality. This matrix manages the intelligibility of bodies and their expected gender and sexuality. A body with male organs is expected to be masculine and heterosexual, a female body is expected to be feminine and heterosexual, with anything else outside these expectations causing many people a cognitive dissonance. This is why I argued that by queering our habitus (Morantes-Africano, 2023), that is, by actively learning about other cultures and people, the more chances we have of having in our psyche alternative configurations of human diversity. This applies to all aspects of intersectionality beyond gender, so that when we acknowledge that we may have limited experience, exposure to or understanding of human diversity, we can understand why our minds might struggle to make sense of it.

A main concern of my work is that gender is not considered essential learning in the UK. In May 2024, then UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak announced plans to draft guidance from the government advising schools not to teach about gender identity (Evans, 2024; Martin, 2024; Smith, 2024). The topic of gender identity has been weaponised to foster moral panic. For

example, Evans (2024, para. 2), reporting for the BBC, quotes Sunak stating that ‘the new guidance would ensure children were not "exposed to disturbing content"’. Moreover, the government’s guidance argued that it was right to take a "cautious approach", adding that ‘teaching materials that "present contested views as fact - including the view that gender is a spectrum" should be avoided’ (para. 7). Martin (2024, para. 2-3) writing for The Daily Telegraph announces that,

> ‘Teachers will have to make clear that gender ideology is a “contested belief” rather than fact if they bring it up in lessons, Gillian Keegan will say later this week. The Education Secretary is set to issue guidance on Thursday following criticism that some pupils were being taught that there were 72 genders’.

It is concerning that the UK Education Secretary used the 72 genders and other misconceptions at the time of drafting guidance for schools (Courea & Adams, 2024). For example, Schools Week (2024) reports how she referred to ‘pupils being taught that gender is a “spectrum” or “fluid”, and the idea “you can have different genders on different days or…there’s 72 of them”’. No evidence of this has been provided by the government, however this fuels the public imagination on gender diversity being something unintelligible and to be avoided. Keegan, with the symbolic power to inform education policy, insists on a binary and outdated view of sex-gender-sexuality in which, according to her, ‘"biological sex is the basis of relationship, sex and health education - not these contested views." (Evans, 2024). A considerable proportion of the population surveyed by YouGov UK, as reported by Smith (2024, para. 6) suggest that,

> ‘Three in ten Britons don’t want teaching about gender identity issues to take place in school: 29% said that schools should not teach that people can be transgender / change their gender identity, and 31% said they should not tell children that people can be non-binary / identify as a gender other than male or female’.

In agreeing with Butler (2023a), our concern should not be about which theory of gender is right but to consider an assault on gender as an assault on democracy. We have the power and the freedom to enable lives worth living, without unfair discrimination or the fear of violence. As more information and perspectives are available around gender, I consider this type of learning important to aid our social interaction, policy making and general educational practice. Our gender identity needs to be protected as a human right and a human capability, as this informs our gender expression which is a valuable tool to signal to others who we are. For this reason, my project uses a knowing-as-being onto-epistemology, as a response to the current

attempts to prevent epistemic subjects, as knowers of their existence, to contribute to the pool of conceptual resources that could help us all make sense of social reality.

In this way, I agree with Fricker's (2014) extension of Amartya Sen (1999) and Martha Nussbaum's (2007) human capabilities approach, in that epistemic capabilities are basic forms of contributions that individuals can make to the knowledge and interpretive tools we use to function as a society. Thus, I argue that queer experiences and lived realities can offer valuable perspectives that could help us expand our understanding of human diversity. On the topic of queer ontologies, by seeing human gender/sexuality as a heteroglossia, we start removing epistemic barriers causing us to aggravate each other in social practice or to affect the sense of belonging of those marginalised due to existing outside of binary categories.

Central to my work is the case of trans individuals, existing in a liminality that could affect their sense of belonging in educational settings. Gender liminality refers to a state of being in which individuals or groups exist in an ambiguous, transitional space between conventional gender categories. This concept can apply to various contexts, including cultural, social, and individual experiences of gender. However, as March (2021) articulates, the everyday experiences of queer and trans individuals bring an 'in-betweenness' that has political implications for notions of liminality. This implies a constant negotiation of our identities in those heteronormative 'spatiotemporalities' that are mostly regulated by formal (such as legal systems) and informal institutions (such as social norms and cultural values) (Xu, 2023). For Butler (1993, p. 178), gender performance is not necessarily the 'truth' of gender but what is performed is an act. This is distinguished from performativity as that 'reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer's "will" or "choice"' (p. 178).

Learning about and from queer individuals and their onto-epistemologies should be considered as a social epistemic contribution via their 'inner truths'. This can have valuable implications for the knowledge pool from which we draw when trying to make sense of the normative aspects of gender that are unexamined, resulting in the symbolic violence that we both experience and exert on others. For example, when teachers enact uniform policies that gender individuals, they are imposing normative values on them (Friedrich, 2021; Reidy, 2021; Shanks, 2023), something that Phelps' (2021) research highlights as particularly problematic

for young women with rules and prescriptive policies around length of skirts. Concerningly, the language used to articulate such policies is centred around decency and modesty, with those following the rules considered moral or good and those who do not as immoral or bad.

Educational settings can and should do more to support youth to develop self-awareness of their lay morality around gender (Morantes-Africano, 2023). For example, changing masculinity norms requires motivating boys to challenge the power and privilege conferred on them, as well as addressing the social ridicule and stigmatisation of those who fail to live up to ideals of masculinity (Amin et al., 2018). What is required here is not the enactment of harsher consequences for those bullying others but to help them unpack where their drive to do so stems from. Anybody trapped in gender binaries and heteronormative expectations is a victim of epistemic injustices.

Identity and personality

This section explores aspects of identity and personality, the former to be understood as the essence of who a person is, their values, and self-definition (Alfrey et al., 2023). Personality, on the other hand, relates to a person's behavioural patterns, responses to social interaction and emotional traits (Tlili et al., 2023), which are susceptible to change through our lifespan (Roberts et al., 2006). In a way, our personality can be read by others by the way we present ourselves, whereas our core identity could be more hidden and only be shown when feeling safe around others. The interplay between what is fixed by nature versus what is socially constructed and susceptible to change is particularly important for the personal dimension of belonging, which I will further explore in the discussion chapter. For example, I am gay and cannot change that; whereas I have been on a journey from being painfully shy to having social skills where I appear confident and engaging. As argued by Bleidorn et al. (2022), personality traits are both stable and susceptible to change through our lifespan. Central to this thesis is the understanding that LGBTQ+ identities are core to our nature and deserve affirmation. Heterosexuals cannot be 'turned' gay and vice versa. Honouring our core identities is important to develop a sense of belonging in education.

There is power in recognising the foundations of our character. As I will articulate in the research design chapter, a queer onto-epistemology is relational. A queer individual is socially constructed, very much akin to de Beauvoir's (1956, p. 273) assertion that 'one is not born, but rather, becomes a woman'. Aspects of identity and personality are important for a conceptualisation of belonging related to LGBTQ+ individuals, because our identities are constructed and often heavily influenced by the stories we are told about who we should be, and how to behave, which could sometimes clash with our core essence. If a queer individual is born and raised in a heteronormative environment, those stories about who they are supposed to be, what is acceptable gender identity and behaviour, and their place in social practice inevitably influences their identity and behaviour. However, it is important to be mindful of the complexity of our humanity, meaning that we need to consider both students and educators as 'conscious, sentient, and purposive human beings, so no scientific explanation of human behavior could ever be complete' (Berliner, 2002, p. 20).

As I have argued before, a normative habitus (Morantes-Africano, 2023) could result for many in internal conflict and existential anxiety, as their inner truth may not correlate to what others expect of their true selves. In this way, aspects of authenticity are highly relevant for belonging, which Brown (2017, p. 172) considers a requirement of belonging, with fitting in being a threat: 'authenticity is a requirement for connection, and perfectionism (a type of fitting in) is a threat'. Moreover, because we can feel belonging only through the courage of being our authentic selves with others, 'our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance (p. 161). However, it could be argued that some students may choose to negotiate what of themselves they share with others and engage with their studies in a transactional way, meaning that their authenticity is protected, though perhaps at the cost of not being able to truly connect with others.

A main argument of my thesis is that belonging should be considered a matter of justice. Wanting to belong but not feeling accepted, respected, or valued due to prejudice is a barrier that can be addressed. For this, exploring epistemic injustices rooted in a lack of collective interpretive or communicative tools (Fricker, 2007; 2014) requires knowledge valuable for social practice. For example, when people say that they do not mind people being gay as long as it is done in private, or that queer individuals are not to be too overt in public, the notion of the closet becomes salient as a place for LGBTQ+ people to belong (Seal, 1993; Sedgwick,

1990). This level of discomfort normally prompts minorities to adapt and compromise their true identity. I argue that we all need to turn inwards to introspect where the discomfort stems from, and how we can address it, rather than expecting others to change. Unless the behaviour does indeed affect us personally. However, in cases of genderqueer clothing, cross dressing, same sex couples having or adopting children, or seeing two men holding hands, why would any of this provoke the hostility that many LGBTQ+ individuals experience? There is perhaps a conflation between identity and behaviour. Here, a differentiation between identity and behaviour is needed as part of the collective interpretive tools I propose to help us navigate and negotiate social interaction. As Solomon (2014, s4) argues,

> anti-gay arguments tend to hinge on a view of gayness as a behavior; the liberatory ones, on gayness as an identity. A behavior can be avoided; an identity is integral and therefore warrants acceptance—or even celebration.

This differentiation prompts towards learning that could help social actors dispel misconceptions underpinning biases towards gender/sexual minorities. As I illustrated in the rationale, left handedness and Dyslexia are examples of gaps in our collective interpretive tools of minorities' lived experience. Learning that an LGBTQ+ identity is not a choice, or a lifestyle can be pedagogically powerful. This key interpretive tool could benefit especially those with the symbolic power to make decisions that impact the experience of queer individuals, such as teachers in their position of gatekeepers of who gets to be included and supported, or otherwise, in education. We need to move towards a desirable future where LGBTQ individuals are valued, accepted, and respected, inherently, as peers in the social contract. Our human agency allows us to learn from the past to engage in the present and in turn imagine a future that considers 'actors' hopes, fears, and desires for the future' (Emirbayer & Mische, 1988, p. 970). This would eventually imply a 'so what?' type of response to being queer, as an epistemic possibility (Carey, 2023), with no bearing on whether individuals' authentic selves would hinder their belonging in fields of study or practice due to their gender/sexuality. I would extend the goal of achieving gender equality to queer individuals as part of the United Nations (2015) agenda for sustainable development.

As Fowler and Wootton (2024) suggest, future possibilities are an exercise of moral and conceptual imagination. For inclusive education, this a means 'critically interrogating deeply internalised power-logics operating at the level of the mind, body and spirit' (Fowler & Wooton, 2024, p. 17). One of such imaginings is to have educators, and any other stakeholder

involved in decision-making, develop a form of active listening that moves beyond empathetic imagining of what is like to be a minority, to start contemplating more seriously the stories that LGBT youth are trying to communicate about their identities. We ought to extend them epistemic rights as epistemic knowers (Byskov, 2020). For example, when queer youth express that they are non-binary, rather than dismissing it as a phase, a temporary confusion, or a fad, we could respond with listening, affirming, and exploring with them what it means, the implications of it and the support they might need.

Queer youth may not have the interpretive tools to make sense and communicate what they are experiencing yet. For example, a UK survey carried out by Youth Chances' (2016, p. A:1) included 7,126 young people aged 16-25. 'Of these 6,514 were LGBTQ young people. 612 were heterosexual non-trans young people and 956 were trans young people'. Their report of being different states that:

- Over half of LGBQ respondents (53%) knew they were LGBQ by the age of 13. Over half of trans respondents (58%) knew they were trans by the same age.
- When coming out as LGBQ or trans, over four fifths of LGBQ respondents (81%) and nearly two thirds of trans respondents (62%) told a friend first. Over a quarter of LGBQ young people (29%) have not told their mother, nearly a half (45%) have not told their father, and 5% have not told anybody.
- Approximately half of trans respondents have not told parents or siblings that they are trans and 28% have not told anybody.
- Young people tell us that they most want emotional support to help them when they are coming out, but most are not getting it.
- The second most important thing to them is to meet other LGBTQ people and again over half of them did not get this opportunity.

Aspects of connection and having others around to support and/or affirm their identity become salient here, which also align to belonging as a relational need. As Brown (2017) reminds us regarding being our authentic selves, 'I can be myself when I know that I'm with people who recognize the inextricable, unnameable, spiritual connection that is shared humanity, because belonging is not in jeopardy'. I consider education a sacred space to be and become, therefore, I argue that there is a need to develop interpretive tools to differentiate identity from personality, our essence cannot be changed but our behaviour can. It is also important to consider how our identities are multilayered and complex. An LGBTQ+ individual cannot be reduced to their gender/sexuality. Instead of othering them, we could consider the use of '*and'* when describing their identity and personality. This applies to any demographic exercise,

understanding here ‘demos’ as people and ‘graphic’ as the process of writing or recording (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2018). The power of discourse can oversimplify and reduce a person, selectively choose which characteristics are put forward to describe their identity.

In my conceptualisation of habitus related to gender/sexuality, I argued that even though we may have been raised with heteronormative expectations, our habitus is susceptible to change. ‘The way we were raised determines our original conditions, however these are altered and shaped by our individual trajectories growing up’ (Morantes-Africano, 2023, p. 253). This applies to aspects of emotional intelligence, ways to interact in social practice and how to deal with difference (Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, 2023). To learn to be inclusive, there is extra labour involved. It is not mandatory but by learning from and about other humans we enrich our understanding of the world. There is value in shared humanity.

Queer theory

My work is inspired by queer theory, not only because the topics explored relate to LGBTQ+ individuals' experiences and perspectives but because it adopts, like much queer research, a critical stance. According to Browne and Nash (2016, p.1), in research deemed queer, the methods used ‘often let us speak to or interact with people, usually on the basis of sexual/gender identities and within anti-normative frameworks’. This aligns to my approach, which is also shared by ‘many scholars including feminist, gay/lesbian, antiracist and postcolonial’ (p. 1). However, as Rosenberg (2008, p. 6) reminds us, queer theory is not a homogenous or systematic school of thought but an array of studies that critique heteronormativity, including ‘those institutions, structures, relations and acts that support heterosexuality as a uniform, natural and all-embracing primordial sexuality’. An interrogation of power relations informing knowledge production implies an outing of its politics (Brockenbrough, 2017), which aligns to my research intentions and corresponds with Giffney (2004) and Di Feliciantonio et al.’s (2017, p. 403) questioning of the normative orders that produce ‘“queerness” as outsider, abnormal and subaltern. In order to challenge these normativities, the production of knowledge must be contested in its conception’. This position justifies the relationship I make in my thesis between epistemic injustices and belonging: a theory of belonging would be incomplete if we do not address barriers that preclude queer individuals’ rights and opportunities in social practice. A collective lack of interpretive tools

requires queer voices to start addressing hermeneutical injustices. These types of actions embrace queer as an action that 'unsettles, dismantles and interrogates systems of normalization, beginning with heteronormativity and heterosexism' (Ingrey, 2018, p. 1).

In this way, my work is part of critical projects emerging to respond in agentic ways to deterministic ways of interpreting social life. For Liinason and Kulpa (2008, p. 1), we are amidst an '"anti-social"-ity of "queer", temporalities of non-normative desires, and geographies of non-Western sexualities. Clearly "there is something in the air" around these issues'. The ultimate dream would be to get to a point in history where the response to queerness is 'so what?' As a postcolonial project we could learn from places where queer existence is not confronted with discrimination and segregation. For example, the Muxes of the region of Juchitán in Mexico (McDonell, 2024), and the Hijras in India (Rhude, 2018) are considered a third gender and their history dates to more than 2,000 years. In the case of the Muxes, Cole-Schmidt (2023) asserts that their queer existence stands in opposition to the West's gender binary; many families consider it a gift to have a Muxe in their family, and they are part of the rich indigenous culture in southern Mexico. However, 'recent murders, abuse and threats are plaguing the community' (para. 8). A third example can be found across Indigenous North America, where 'some people lived their lives as neither men nor women. Some were seen as combining – even transcending – masculine and feminine characteristics' (de Groot, 2024, para. 2). They are known as the Two-Spirit, 'gender and sexuality were not understood in binary, "either/or" terms before the arrival of Europeans' (para. 1). As Nolin (in de Groot, 2004, para. 32) articulates it, 'for me that's walking in balance. You have both that male and female spirit'. Similarly, the celebrated Two-Spirit Elder Ma-Nee Chacaby recalls her grandmother's understanding of her gender identity: 'there's two great spirits living inside of you. One is a female, one is a male, she said'. There is much to learn from this approach to respecting individual differences, and from the postcolonial ethos shown by including it as part of the LGBTQ+ acronym (BBC, 2018).

In this thesis, 'queer' is both a conceptual approach, and a political move that embraces a 'self-identification or assemblage of practices of the self' (Browne & Nash, 2016, p. 3). The politics of representation for silenced minorities are important to my work, and in this way queer as an analytical tool makes heteronormativity a perspective worth enquiring about. I do not aim to replace an ideology with another one but to add additional lenses and perspectives to our

collective interpretive tools. The examples above show how emancipatory it could be for some to embrace the masculine and feminine aspects of themselves. This knowledge project overtly emphasises that equal rights for queer people does not mean fewer rights for heterosexual or cisgender counterparts. Therefore, it is important to highlight how the privileging of situated knowledges does not necessarily lead to reverse discrimination.

We may see reverse discrimination as the instances where members of a historically privileged group are treated unfairly as a result of efforts to address discrimination and inequality faced by historically marginalised or minoritised groups. However, Lippert-Rasmussen (2020) reminds us that forms of affirmative action that involve discrimination are not unjust per se. Listening to the voices of the marginalised is not only fair but a valuable epistemic exercise. This knowledge project hence uses a type of politics of representation aligned to a queer act of resistance that avoids practising '"representational politics," i.e. speaking on someone's behalf, while at the same time remaining sensitive to the needs of minorities with whom we may – at times – share certain political interests' (Mertz, 2008, p. 21).

Any critical undertaking requires multiple perspectives to make sense of lived experience (Morantes-Africano, 2022), otherwise we might be sheltering in echo chambers where the messages that we already believe in are fed back to us. In this way, the co-construction of knowledge presented in this thesis balances personal and subjective accounts with forms of 'me too' resonances, documented and available via scholarly networks, media, and cultural artefacts. This means that the personal and seemingly unique experiences of my participants, as well as my own contingencies, are situated and related to wider accounts of human experience. As belonging as justice is the main thread that my work aims to articulate, a queer interrogation of power/knowledge is necessary. For example, Bacchetta's (2002, p. 951) asserts that 'in a host of countries across the globe, sexual agency is considered exclusively male. Where women are not imagined to have sexual agency at all, lesbian sex is not outlawed because it is not imagined to exist'. Extending this to queer ontologies, imagining that two humans can love each other regardless of their bodily configurations ought to be part of a wider discussion to disrupt metanarratives that sustain hegemonic ways to interpret life, including the idea that '[h]umanity is very much a male of the species: it is a he' (Braidotti, 2013, p. 24). We can and ought to make our human experience less anthropocentric and more ecological too (Gamble & Hanan, 2016).

As discussed in the gender section of this literature review, the topic of gender diversity is currently being presented and widely shared in mainstream media as a dangerous ideology (see my example of the UK Education Secretary claiming that some schools are teaching children about 72 gender identities). Butler (1993, p. 171) deems these 'performative acts' as forms of authoritative speech in which the uttering of statements performs not only an action but also exercises a binding power. The performative uses the power of discourse to articulate and establish authority, conferring it further power. As Foucault (2003, p.24) articulates it:

> Relations of power are indissociable from a discourse of truth, and they can neither be established nor function unless a true discourse is produced, accumulated, put into circulation, and set to work. Power cannot be exercised unless a certain economy of discourses of truth functions in, on the basis of, and thanks to, that power.

Embracing a critical questioning of what type of knowledges are out there, how they are produced, and which are hegemonic and why, requires intersectional perspectives from feminist and postmodern studies. I consider this valuable as a queer critique is critical of itself. For example, Butler (1993, p. 173) argues that 'as much as identity terms must be used, as much as "outness" is to be affirmed, these same notions must become subject to a critique of the exclusionary operations of their own production'. For my research on belonging, this means considering who is represented and who is not, who is included and who is excluded, a limit to the knowledge presented in this thesis is that it only includes the voices of those who volunteered, meaning that those knowing about my research had the opportunity to take part, but what about those who did not? There might a big loss in the lack of access to make one's account of experience be heard.

Mental health and wellbeing of LGBTQ+ individuals

When LGBTQ+ individuals are rejected, bullied, or denied opportunities to live a life with dignity, their sense of a right to exist as a sexual/gender identity minority can deteriorate to a point where living becomes untenable. For my argument of making belonging a guide to advance inclusive practice in education, this means considering the impact that the people who surround them at home, school, work, or general social life have on their sense of self, and their place in the world (Green, 2007). This includes *all* involved in education, since by not feeling accepted, respected, and supported, young people may continue attempting to, or even taking, their own lives. According to Stonewall (2018, para. 3), 13% of LGBT people aged 18-24 said

that they have attempted to take their own life in the past year and almost half of trans people (46%) have thought about taking their own life in the last year, with 31% of LGB people who are not trans expressing the same. Ofsted's (2019, p. 10) consultation to update the latest equality, diversity and inclusion statement of the Education Inspection Framework also share a concern around LGBT+ learners being 'more likely to be the subject of bullying or discrimination during their time in education'.

From an international perspective, the World Health Organization (2023, para. 2) emphasises how vulnerable populations, including LGBTQI individuals, are at higher risk or suicide. Hedegaard et al. (2020), report that suicide is the second leading cause of death for people aged 10-34 in the US. The Trevor Project's (2021) research also reports that in the US nearly half of LGBTQ youth seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year, with 14% of LGBTQ youth having attempted suicide. They also highlight how LGBTQ youth are more than four times as likely to attempt suicide than their peers, and transgender and nonbinary youth are at even higher risk. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2022) concur, arguing that gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men face a significantly higher risk of suicide attempts, particularly before the age of 25. They also report that a study of youth in grades 7-12 revealed that lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth were more than twice as likely to have attempted suicide compared to their heterosexual peers. This increased risk is associated with factors such as being gay or bisexual in a hostile environment, which can have adverse effects on their mental health. One of such hostile environments can be educational spaces, where name calling, micro-aggressions, harassment, bullying or rejection of LGBTQ+ students happen (BBC, 2014; 2019; Just Like Us, 2021b; Roberts, 2020; Stonewall, 2023).

In the UK, statistics show that LGBTQ+ students experience significant levels of bullying in schools. Stonewall (2017) reports that in 2017 45% of LGBTQ+ pupils were bullied for being lesbian, gay, bi, or trans in Britain's secondary schools and colleges. This was down from 55% in 2012 and 65% in 2007, indicating a decrease but still a prevalent issue. The report also revealed that half of LGBTQ+ young people frequently or often hear homophobic language in school, and over one-third frequently or often hear negative comments about bi people. According to Just Like Us (2021a) LGBT+ school pupils are twice as likely to have been bullied and 91% have heard negative language about being LGBT+ in the past year. Additionally, the report highlighted that LGBTQ+ students who have come out are

significantly more likely to be bullied, with 14% of those who are out experiencing biphobic bullying, compared to 7% of those who are not out. Rasmussen (2004) and Stonewall (2017) agree that coming out is a major challenge for queer youth and corresponds with the experience of some of my participants during their time in secondary school.

As Reid (2020) reminds us, on May 17, 1990, the World Health Organization declassified homosexuality as a mental disorder, a decision that is now commemorated annually as the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia (IDAHOBIT). The American Psychological Association (2008, para. 1) also clarifies that sexual orientation 'refers to an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to men, women, or both sexes'. However, discrimination and abuse against the LGBTQ+ community persist globally, with the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbating some of these issues. To illustrate, Reid (2020) reports that in Uganda, 19 homeless LGBTQ+ individuals were imprisoned for two months on charges of violating COVID-19 curfew regulations. In Hungary, the pandemic was used as a pretext to introduce legislation banning legal gender recognition for transgender people. In Panama, where women and men have been required to remain quarantined on alternate days, some transgender people have faced abuse from security officials, no matter which day they ventured out, and in the Philippines, LGBTQ+ people faced humiliating punishments by security officials enforcing curfews. These instances underscore the ongoing challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community, even as progress is made in recognising and protecting their rights. IDAHOBIT serves as a reminder of these challenges and the need for continued advocacy and action to ensure equality and respect for all, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity is essential to advance social justice.

Chapter three: research approach

As articulated in the rationale, my thesis argues that belonging is a matter of justice. As a fundamental human need, individuals need to feel connected, respected, valued, seen, and supported to be integral parts of groups of people, fields of knowledge and practice, as well as the social spaces and places they wish to belong to. Thus, my work considers the experiences and perspectives of queer individuals, as a minoritised group, to be an important epistemic contribution. Learning from the voices of those traditionally silenced needs to be regarded not only as a human right but also a human capability, as their epistemic contribution could help us all to enrich our collective interpretive tools (Demirtas, 2020; Fricker, 2014). For this reason, education and teacher education are considered sites for social justice, as they are in a position to critically engage with what we know about minorities, explore root causes of injustices, and empower educators to support their students' learning and unlearning—all which I consider preferable over prescribing actions for educators to enact anti bullying policies, or to embed into their curriculum the inclusion of minority groups without understanding the reasons for it. This could be deemed not only as tokenisation but also counterproductive for those with negative dispositions towards certain groups of people.

In this way my work is centred around knowledge production from a standpoint epistemology, highlighting how a lack of collective interpretive tools to understand other people's experience can lead to epistemic injustices (Fricker, 2007). This is the case of LGBTQ+ individuals who experience social practice in ways that range from acceptance to hostility, leading for many to what Orne (2013) defines as 'being in the life of fire', and resorting to responding to this by either 'educating the stigmatizer, minimizing interaction by tailoring their identity, or disengaging' (p. 229). Systemic misunderstandings of queerness need to be addressed to tackle issues of inequalities, as these are largely based on a limited, partial, and outdated understanding of gender/sexuality identities and expressions (Government Equalities Office, 2016). My project does not aim to change people's opinions and positions regarding the acceptance of queerness, but to highlight how adding more perspectives to our understanding of human diversity is important.

This means that the more information we have about the lived experiences and perspectives of minorities the richer our understanding of the complexity of the human experience. In this way,

my work is wary of populist opinion. For example, the fact that a vast majority of people may not fully understand the experience of trans individuals does not validate the injustices they experience. As Fricker (2007, p. 147) asserts, 'the powerful have an unfair advantage in structuring collective social understandings'. As fellow humans, we must do more to extend belonging to those who exist in the margins. My work asks to embrace discomfort, and requires engaging with complexity, dilemmatic positions that have no simple solutions but favour compromises, and the contemplation of an array of perspectives. For this reason, the arguments below show an entanglement of knowing-as-being, the socially constructed nature of queer lives, and the need for standpoint epistemologies to offer additional interpretive tools to our knowledge pool. This also has ethical and moral implications for this project, which will be discussed as part of the methodological complexities (Bettinger, 2013) considered when involving a small sample of ten self-identified LGBTQ+ individuals to share their experiences and perspectives of how their identities shaped their educational journey. My intention with this knowledge project is to interpret the meaning and practice of belonging through my participants' contributions, which are to be understood as contingent, situated, and partial. Nonetheless, my work contributes to the knowledges of fields of inclusive practice in education, queer theory, and qualitative research.

Constructionism

This knowledge project is aligned to a constructionist paradigm and its onto-epistemological, methodological, and ethical implications. Guba and Lincoln (1994, p. 105) define a research paradigm as 'the basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator' in their research process. In addition to the positivist and post-positivist paradigms, they outline three alternatives: critical theory, constructivism, and participatory (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). This shows variations of definitions and terminology used by researchers regarding this paradigm: constructionism (Bersani, 1995; Clarke, 2021b), constructivism (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), and social constructivism (Olsson, 2008). There is also the consideration of 'the qualitative' being a research methodology and not a paradigm (Mertens, 2014). I explore below some nuances of constructivism and constructionism, however, for consistency I will refer to constructionism as the main paradigm guiding this project whilst drawing on constructivism, as the relationship of the two defines the queer onto-epistemology adopted in this research.

To articulate the alignment between the research intentions and the overall research approach, I borrow from Barad (2007) the notion of entanglement, in that what I am researching is entangled with the way it is researched and who is part of it. The lived experience of LGBTQ+ students is constructed through the interplay between their queer identities and their situated upbringing, family values, friendships, school experiences, media influences, among other sociocultural factors that shape them. In addition to this, I come in as an educator and researcher, being entangled in this web of factors, as my motivations to understand the educational experience of queer students in the UK is grounded on my own knowing-as-being a gay man, and this 'insider/outsider paradox' (Duran et al., 2022) has profound implications for the constructed knowledge presented in this research report. I borrow from Watson (2005, p. 16) the stance of bringing my own experiences and subjectivities 'to bear as a strength to be drawn on rather than a contaminating feature to be eliminated'.

This brings a level of reflexivity for me as a researcher. My personal and professional experiences, as well as my academic interest around the meanings and practices of education, are tightly linked with my intention to better understand a queer experience of belonging to advance the projects of inclusion and social justice. I see value in making this worth knowing and sharing, especially for its pedagogical and educational significance for teachers and teacher education, and perhaps even wider social practice. In this way, this brings an onto-epistemological offset whereby 'practices of knowing and being are not isolable; they are mutually implicated. We don't obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are of the world' (Barad, 2007, p.185). It is this mutual implication that justifies how a constructionist paradigm could help us explore how the identities, positionings, and opportunities of queer people, in a largely heteronormative social life, come to exist via the accounts told by my research participants about whether being queer had any impact in their educational journeys and sense of belonging in education. This also means that the knowledge of individuals without a lived experience of being queer is also implicit in this co-constructed understanding of queer lives, rights, and opportunities to belong or otherwise.

As explained by Gormally and Coburn (2013, p. 874), 'research is an interpreted representation of a constructed reality'. For this project this means that the knowledge claims made by my participants are based on an interpretation of their constructed internal and external realities, drawn from their experiences and perspectives, which I use to help me as the researcher to

interpret social reality (Bhattacharya, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In this way, my work is constructionist, constructivist and interpretive. To further explore the relationship between these concepts, I use Hyde's (2020) distinction of constructionism and constructivism, and how they fit within interpretivist research: the emphasis of constructivism is how knowledge is constructed, whereas constructionism deals with the characteristics and conditions for social participation, relationships and sociocultural factors influencing them. In an oversimplified way, constructivism happens inside the individual whereas constructionism is a social process that happens outside, between people as they join to create realities (Sommers-Flannagan, 2015). Moreover, Roth's (2011) critique of constructivism offers *passibility* as a notion of knowing and learning mediated by a living/lived body; for example, through pain, suffering, love, and passion, which go beyond the limits of cognitive thinking and sometimes cannot be explained through language. A main contribution of social constructionism is the premise of the social creation of identity: 'identity creation and maintenance is work that we are constantly engaged in as individuals' (Spencer, Pryce & Walsh, 2014, p. 85).

For Crotty (1998) and Gergen (1997), the above implicates an individual understanding of constructionist factors, such as culture, in the shaping of the way we see, feel, and come to construct our view of the world. Constructionism, however, requires a mutual relationality that emphasises a need to inter-view experiences and perspectives, making this an interpretive exercise throughout. The nuance and complexity of my participants' stories reflect how they have assigned meaning to their experience, how they navigate being queer in a heteronormative world, and how learning from their lived experience has been a powerful force to shape their identity. As Duran et al. (2022) articulate it, for many LGBTQ individuals, queer identity is a matter of embodied resistance. Knowing and being are mutually implicated, and this happens through complex processes of internal and external factors and contingencies that make our identities unique, complex, and intersectional.

From a constructionist perspective, individuals learn about themselves and shape their identities while being or trying to be part of social groups, making belonging a salient human need that requires constant negotiation to be met. As I explored in 'queering habitus' (Morantes-Africano, 2023), our habitus is socially constructed via early socialisation, internalised, and can produce lasting dispositions that are normative in nature: for example, on

the rights and wrongs around gender identity and expression. However, and central to my work, is the role of learning to enable change – our habitus can change, and this is where constructivism and constructionism offer us tools to challenge and reconfigure the discourses and practices that affect gender/sexuality minorities. For this, we must first learn 'how they construct their worlds, not how they compare to predominant social norms' (Furman et al., 2003, p. 265).

This also aligns with a constructionist idea of knowledge that is not objective or fixed but always changing (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). For example, by rejecting essentialist discourses of gender and sexuality that argue for innate, fixed, and immutable differences between men and women, we can challenge the unintelligibility that many seem to experience about trans or non-binary people who do not belong in the 'heterosexual matrix' (Butler, 1990). In this way, constructionism disallows 'the existence of an external objective reality independent of an individual from which knowledge may be collected or gained' (Costantino, 2008, p. 116). Instead, the knowledge presented here is co-constructed by me and my participants, while bringing perspectives from queer and feminist studies to question language, discourse, and to critique essentialist ideas of gender/sexuality that instead of promoting solidarity create division and segregation (Foucault, 1972, 1978).

As Van Hooft (2023) explains, essentialism uses three key arguments: 1) that nature is divided into discrete types of things that are different and distinct from each other, 2) that these differences are eternal and necessary, and 3) that each kind of thing has an 'essence' required to maintain its true nature. This 'exhausts the field of gender' (Butler, 1990), reduces natural diversity to binaries and denies the fluidity of identities, the possibility to change and evolve, and limits our human capacity to transform those exclusionary and discriminatory structures that affect minorities. Queer people have the right to have a dignified life. As Bersani (1995, p. 35) asserts, 'the most radical element in constructionist studies is to question the given or natural status of heterosexuality'.

Although hegemonic and unquestionable for some, learning about the impact of heteronormativity could help us all to reconfigure it where it does not advance social justice. For example, by acknowledging that there is new language and an emergent understanding of diversity within minorities, making the learning of queer experiences and perspectives a matter

of education is the right thing to do. I question here the notion of LGBTQ+ as a community, in that the main unifying factor is the fight against oppression. There is no queer agenda other than levelling up the playing field regarding rights and opportunities for those experiencing inequalities. For this reason, my research responds to what I consider a gap in the knowledge of human diversity, aligned to Fricker's (2007) characterisation of hermeneutical injustices, that I propose should be part of teacher education. I argue that educators need professional learning on the power of language and discourse (Foucault, 1982) to be used as a critical interpretive tool. When we understand the socially constructed nature of some truths, we can respond to these with our moral compass. A constructionist approach to researching queer experiences and perspectives implicates an onto-epistemological entanglement of knowing-as-being, which is explored below.

Ontology

The nature of a queer reality, as I began to outline above, is constructed through the interplay of several internal and external contingencies ranging from the individual alignment of sex, gender and sexuality to the sociocultural, political, and historical factors that define their place in the world. In line with Wittig's (1992) assertion that 'one is not born a woman,' I argue that a queer individual is socially constructed by discourses and practices. Considering the key ontological questions of 'the form and nature of reality' and 'what is there that can be known about it?' (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 108), my work necessitates perspectives from both constructivism and constructionism. As Bunge's (2001, pp. 10309-10) typology suggests, constructivism can be cognitive when it deals with knowledge that results from human constructions, 'rather than either innate ideas or the product of revelation, perception, or intuition', whereas in an ontological constructivism 'the knower makes the world'. In this section I focus on the ontological implications of constructionism and the following section will discuss how constructivism influences a queer standpoint epistemology.

I start my positioning of queer ontology as socially constructed by bringing back Barad's (2007) notion of entanglement, where an onto-epistemology means no separation between being and knowing (Rhee, 2021a, 2022b). I argue that this knowing-as-being places lived experience in a privileged position to understand how some knowledges are embodied to the point of deeply influencing our identities and responses to social life. For example, when queer

youth receive mostly negative messages from family, friends, in school, from media, their identity becomes an internal struggle between acceptance and fitting-in in social life. 'True belonging' should not require queer individuals to change who they are to be accepted but to be who they are (Brown, 2017, p. 157). It is inevitable that our experiences and responses from those around us shape our habitus (Morantes-Africano, 2023). This makes isolated experiences, that is, one-off instances, vastly different from lived-experienced. Any form of sustained discourse of practice, as is the case of bullying or micro harassment, can deeply affect our self-worth and identity. A main concern here is how this can deeply permeate our identity, resulting in assumed de-facto privileges for some, such as heterosexuality, while others learn that being different means occupying a marginal place in the world.

Returning to a queer ontology, this knowing-as-being is laden with existential anxiety as wanting to belong but not feeling valued, accepted, respected, and supported by others have moral and ontological implications. For Brown (2017, p. 161), we can feel belonging 'only if we have the courage to share our most authentic selves with people, our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance'. For this reason, I argue that more attention is needed to the notion of belonging as an emerging aspect of inclusive practice in education. There is a careful balance to be achieved between our students' identities, sense of self, and needs and motivations, situated within external opportunities and support to realise their dreams.

In this way, belonging is also fundamentally a political project. A queer existence deserves not only the opportunity to access educational spaces but the support to thrive. As Patricia Hill Collins (2017) argues, identity politics are important to counter versions of intersectionality that try to gate-keep and sanitise standpoint epistemology. Neat categories of man/woman or heterosexual/homosexual need to be revisited as part of advancing our knowledge of diversity. Our identities are complex, multilayered, and intersectional. As I discuss below, we need to redefine the meaning of relativism in interpretive-constructionist research. Identity politics are important political tools to highlight social inequalities and act on them, especially outside of academia. My main ontological concern with queer lives is that we cannot wish them away, they exist, have existed for millennia, and will exist in the future. Our current and future colleagues, students, children, or family members are and will be queer and building a world where they can be and belong to is both a choice and a necessity. Love and belonging are

‘irreducible needs for all people. In the absence of love and belonging, there is always suffering’ (Brown, 2017, p. 154).

The constructionist approach of my work also means a rejection of positivist and realist views of the nature of reality: there is no ‘truth’ out there to be found regarding essentialist claims of gender and corresponding sexuality, nor is there a uniformed understanding or collective agreement of inclusive practice or belonging for LGBTQ+ individuals. The complexity and intersectionality of queer lives therefore requires an interpretive-constructionist ontology that contrasts to any form of foundationalism. This means a questioning of any self-evident truth that does not require support from other beliefs (Duignan, Lotha & Rodríguez, 2019). This scepticism towards the infallibility of our knowledge of the social world, includes my own and that of what was shared by my participants. Therefore, a reflexive approach is needed to situate both knowledge and knowers to avoid overclaiming that some truths are more valid than others.

As I hinted above, a constructionist ontology is associated with relativism (Bunge, 2001; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, 2018). Therefore, I adopt a ‘soft’ form of relativism in that a queer ontology rejects modernist understandings of power and people, making individual identities and expressions ‘relational practices’ (Crawley et al., 2021, p. 129). This means that we define each other, but the fact that minorities may have fewer numbers to make their voices be as powerful as majorities, standpoint epistemology ‘does not advocate—nor is it doomed to—relativism’ (Harding, 1992, p. 449). For example, when queer theorists question the hegemonic discourses and practices that sustain the oppression of minorities (see Seal, 2019), this cannot be dismissed as a ‘relative’ reality.

While relativism could offer avenues to challenge hegemonic norms that disadvantage minorities, it could also be used to justify intolerance and disrespect towards gender/sexual minorities. More worryingly, it could reproduce cycles of inequality experienced by the stigmatised ‘other’ whose identity has been discredited by their social group, leading to rejection. As Goffman (1963, p. 7) explains, a person with a stigma is believed to be ‘not quite human’ and this constructed ideology can be used to see them as a threat, therefore justifying their maltreatment. The case of trans people illustrates this, since current fears of allowing persons of the ‘opposite’ gender in social life carries unjustified responses to an imagined

threat. For example, trans exclusionary radical feminists such as author J. K. Rowling conflate presenting trans women alongside sex offenders, and publicly misgenders trans individuals (Brooks, 2024). This feeds moral panic and fosters a negative bias towards them. In this way, our social imaginary of queerness as a threat to the family, children and the vulnerable continues to being used to deny them rights and important life opportunities.

Another revealing example, at the time of writing this text, is that the UK government launched statutory guidance for schools and colleges regarding the social transitioning of children in schools: advising education to safeguard children while making it overt that 'there is no general duty to allow a child to "social transition"' (Department for Education, 2023b, p. 3). This formulation means that trans youth may not have any support at school or college, which are places where they should feel safe and supported. Their sense of safety and belonging is under threat too. Instead of having gender affirming practices, this proposal reifies the closet as the preferable space to be queer (Sedgwick, 1990; Warner, 1993). Four of my ten participants identify as trans and offered accounts of this. Their stories are of courage and resilience, illustrating how after school they learnt to present themselves without sacrificing who they are. This follows Brown's (2017, p. 159) suggestion of vulnerability and discomfort needing to be embraced to be our authentic selves, otherwise we 'not only feel separate from others, but we even feel disconnected from ourselves'. As will be discussed in chapter four, many of my participants' original position and journeys through school defined their identity; however, post compulsory education offered them new beginnings.

An additional example of constructionist ontologies can be found in Fanon's (1952) postcolonial articulation of cases where racialised and colonised subjects assimilate the identity imposed on them by the oppressor. He defined the impact of this as the practice of non-being. Through this, according to Drabinsky (2019), he sketches a relationship between ontology and sociological structures in which the latter generate the former, locking subjectivities into categories. The parallel of a queer ontology here is that of an identity relationally defined by being non-being heterosexual or cis gender. A hopeful aspect of this is that while non-being can be oppressive, it can also offer possibilities for the oppressed to resist and ally with others to create new categories of being and become who they decide to be. Queer people are resilient people; not all their stories are of tragedy, as discussed by Glazzard et al. (2020).

The key implication of the above for my research is that a queer ontology is influenced by relational practices, where identities are bound to knowledges of us and others, mutually defining each another. I know I am gay because that identity category exists in opposition to that of heterosexuality and has been given to me by others. If I were the only human on the planet such identity would be irrelevant. Understanding these differences could help us move away from foundationalist and essentialist claims of gender/sexuality that sustain inequalities. We all need more education around the impact that heteronormative discourses and practices have in the construction of our morality and our responses towards queer individuals. For this reason, a queering of our habitus through more queer visibility (Morantes-Africano, 2023) could help us advance social justice. For this we need more epistemic contributions, therefore the below focuses on the standpoint epistemology adopted in this research.

Epistemology

Moving on from constructionism as an ontology, we now turn to constructivism as an epistemology (Ültanır, 2012) and continue to elaborate on the knowing-as-being entanglement. Being and becoming is a response to assimilated knowledges, norms and expectations that shape our life trajectories. This means learning from the feedback received by our senses in conscious and unconscious ways. For example, as described by Field (2021), obstacles to successful human action require individuals to test the environment and adapt their responses. From this point of view our experiences make our journeys unique, in that our situatedness is shaped by intersectional contingencies: our gender, family configuration, socioeconomic position, and cultural norms, inform who we are relationally. This also means types of learning and knowing that are complex, sometimes conflicting but ultimately all entangled through such situatedness. It goes beyond the proximity of others; it implies a 'lack of an independent, self-contained existence' (Barad, 2007). It reminds us of connectedness as a key characteristic of belonging. We can't survive without one another (Brown, 2017).

My work adopts standpoint theory by combining the notions of situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988) and standpoint epistemology (Harding, 1991, 1992). Drawing on Dewey's (1933, 1938) view of inquiry, not as a passive observation of objective reality but rather an active process of transforming an indeterminate situation into a determine one, the reciprocity between the observer and the observed means that they influence one another (Haraway, 1988). My view of

knowing-as-being is that of identities relationally defined, experiences that are situated and bound to the interplay between personal and external contingencies, and which result in complex and multilayered aspects of our identity. This means that my work acknowledges not only the act of observation but takes seriously the relationship between the researcher and what is being researched. My knowing-as-being a queer educator and researcher, and that of my participants, are examples of this: we all engaged in an interrogation of our experience to try and make sense of it. This practice destabilises claims of scientific practices that produce objective knowledge by observing natural phenomena from a neutral position. Haraway (1988) calls this type of observation the 'god trick': a synopsis type of view of an issue that pretends to understand it at a glance. It comes from an uninhabited position. This is specially concerning when defining people and oversimplifying their lived reality. My thesis does not align to this.

As I have articulated in the ontology section, queer identities are relationally defined, and many of the issues they experience are rooted in partial and outdated knowledge that live in the social imaginary of many. For this reason, their situated knowledges are privileged in this project. As researchers we need to be answerable to what we see and how we report it, as unlocatable means irresponsible. Kuntz (2015, p. 26) calls this type of researcher a 'responsible methodologist' in that what we know and how we come to know it 'is never socially neutral, never absent the import of the ethical frame'. Barad (2007, p. 381) adopts a similar stance, defining an ethical researcher as one who is 'response-able to the way we make the world, and to consider the effects our knowledge-making processes have on the world'. My reflexive approach around my research intentions, entanglement, and methodological choices to carry out and present my research make me answerable and response-able.

Instead of neutral and objective knowledge, a constructionist epistemology theorises knowledge as 'power moves, not moves toward truth' (Haraway, 1988, p. 576). In this way, I borrow this idea of embodied accounts of truth (p. 578), or what I have been referring to as knowing-as-being. To put it more simply, Haraway (p. 581) articulates this as '*situated knowledges'* (emphasis in original). One of the implications for my research, on the situatedness of the knowledge shared by my participants, is an understanding of knowledge not as neutral but produced via the social practice of inter-viewing our experiences and perspectives. A queer epistemology questions how claims to objectivity and the validity of certain knowledges are grounded on a supposedly 'value-free, impartial, dispassionate

research' (Harding, 1992, p. 459). However, as Hall (2017) argues, a queer epistemology involves both self-knowledge, or a personal understanding of our identity and experiences, as well as standpoint, or the situatedness of that self within larger social structures that determine levels of power and privilege.

My work responds to a concern around partial accounts of knowledge that currently define social practice, policy, and discourse regarding queer existence: we seem to know more about what society thinks about sexual minorities than what sexual minorities think about society (Schnabel, 2018, p. 3). As Harding (1992, p. 442) offers, the activities of those at the top organise and limit what those who perform such activities can know about themselves. This places special emphasis on standpoint epistemology to favour the experiences and perspectives of queer students to share insights, produce alternative versions of assumed truths, or to add to our beliefs and understanding of social reality (Bailey, 2021; Borland, 2017; Homfray, 2008). As previously explained, my work does not intend to change people's opinions of queerness but to add insights that could be valuable to inform their responses towards them. For example, why it is important to respect gender pronouns, avoiding deadnaming trans individuals, or assuming that sexual orientation is a choice. The highly politicised issue of trans women in sports (Human Rights Watch, 2023) is another example of the limited rights and opportunities that some queer individuals must belong. A knowing-as-being is understood in my work as a core aspect of our identities that has been influenced by our lived-experience, such as ways to navigate being gay/lesbian in a jurisdiction where homosexuality is prohibited (Merabet, 2014; Tadele, 2011).

This highlights a type of knowledge that comes from those experiences that gradually make us realise that there are some 'inner truths' about our identity that are non-fungible. This is different from aspects of our identity that can be modified over time. My personal example of the former here is 'I am a man and am romantically and sexually attracted to men,' I know that even if I try to deny it or change it, this subjectivity is immutable. On the other hand, I used to be a designer, and a dancer, but lack of practice in both fields have made me change how I articulate who I am and what I do. My work is interested in being and becoming, the former is part of those core and non-fungible aspects of our nature, whereas becoming is part of our journeys and life trajectories, susceptible to change.

To capture aspects of identity, a level of trust, openness and safety was needed between myself and the participants. As Homfray (2008) suggests, a queer researcher carrying out research with queer participants may have unique vantage points when compared to non queer researchers, in many instances manifesting in an 'unspoken rapport and recognition' (p. 3). In my case, aspects of association and lived experience, plus my overt articulation of the research intentions, were significant to establish trust and rapport with my participants. I felt honoured and humbled by their generosity in sharing intimate aspects of themselves. They owned their stories, and by me valuing them and showing how their experiences and perspectives were valuable for my educational research they felt heard and seen. In this way, the process is an example of how harnessing own identities can be powerful for educational research. By affirming their accounts, their subjectivities, and unique identities their experience moved from being anecdotal to becoming material of valuable knowledge co-creation. Their insights in many ways contrasted with hegemonic understandings of gender/sexuality diversity, produced by those in positions of power. For example, opposite to the discourses that pathologise gender/sexuality (dysphoria), what is unnatural for my trans participants was to perform a gender expected from others rather than what felt natural to them.

Methodology

Considering Denzin and Lincoln's (2018, p. 195) view of methodology as 'the best means for gaining knowledge about the world', this section further explores the advantages and limitations of standpoint approaches. As Lester (2022) asserts, in qualitative research methodology is always in the making, it is historically situated, culturally bound, and not meant to stand still. I value how qualitative inquiry contributes to our understanding of the world (Patton, 2015). My work, driven by my values and convictions (Aper, 1995), responds to a current need for educators to learn about diversity in gender and sexuality, we have new knowledge that needs to be part of their professional learning. However, rather than arguing a case from the statistical significance or implications related to recruitment and achievement figures, the scope of this research is a small sample of ten LGBTQ+ students completing post-compulsory education in the northeast of England.

By looking at the experiences and perspectives of minorities, my work favours qualitative approaches that stem from and are 'inevitably interwoven' with disciplines such as sociology

and psychology, and perspectives such as feminism and queer theory (Lincoln et al., 2018, p. 214). Theory in qualitative research gives direction and frames the work in a particular direction and with clear intentionality. As such, the conceptual tools used in this thesis aim to move 'inquiry forward toward deeper levels of understanding'. (Agee, 2009, p. 438). In a qualitative methodology, the focus is on people and the data does not come from statistics but stories, personal framing of issues, and own interpretation of experience. In a way, my methodological approach is queer, not because of the nature of the participants but because it takes a critical approach 'to highlight the instability of taken-for-granted meanings and resulting power relations' (Brown & Nash, 2010, p. 4).

A key methodological implication of using standpoint theory for this project has been the deliberate inclusion of LGBTQ+ students' voices to explore the meaning of lived experience. This decision aligns with the functional and disciplinary reflexivity proposed by Wilkinson (1988), as both the research tools and my positionality as a queer researcher and teacher educator are implicated here. For example, even though my work aims to offer insights for teachers and teacher education, the perspectives of teachers or any other key stakeholder were not part of the methodological decisions made for this project. This is partly because of practicalities related to time and resources, but also because I carefully considered the limits of knowledge that non-queer teachers, managers or support staff could offer to this knowledge project. As the central question of my research is how the experiences and perspectives of LGBTQ+ students completing post-compulsory education could inform inclusive practice, their situatedness gives them a vantage point. As Arnold (2018) suggests, not all outputs and conclusions of research aim to be clear cut, instead it could aim to develop more empathy for different views, give voice to those who are rarely heard, and an insight into the messiness of research. 'These are, after all, hugely powerful outcomes' (para. 5).

This partiality and subjectivity are acknowledged as part of a 'bias paradox' in standpoint epistemology (Rolin, 2006), in which the attempt to create knowledge from a particular viewpoint could be interpreted as another form of foundationalism. To counter this, we need a context of epistemic justification, and as suggested by Rolin (2006, p. 185), this means 'doing research with certain moral and social values'. My work approaches this by arguing that policy and standards encourage educators to be inclusive and address students' needs (Department for

Education, 2011; Education and Training Foundation, 2022; Advance HE, 2023). However, there is no overt guidance to make gender/sexual minorities part of this. For this reason, the epistemic privilege of LGBTQ+ is favoured to appropriately challenge assumptions, aiming to further educators' understanding of inclusion and belonging as a practice.

Reciprocity aided with the rigour and trustworthiness required to the knowledge produced and presented in this qualitative project (Harrison et al., 2021). This means that all interview data, including my own contributions, are 'subject to the same kind of analytic focus as that of the interviewee' (Roulston, 2010, p. 60). This reflexivity stems from an awareness of common mistakes made by researchers, such as adopting methodologies and methods without 'much awareness of why, apart from reasons of the most mechanical or "calculative" kind' (Kuntz, 2008, p. 181). An example of this is collecting data and presenting it as findings that imply a straightforward process of summarising information by popularity of answers, rather than the in-depth process of analysis made on the data presented in the next chapter of this thesis. In this way my work contrasts 'positivist criteria of internal and external validity,' replacing it with 'trustworthiness and authenticity' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 197), or the type or rigour that is less aligned to validity and reliability and more towards 'credibility and dependability' (Given, 2008, p. xxxi). The below illustrates the rigour of the ethical approval processes, the care and consideration taken for the participant recruitment, the dialogic nature of the interviews (Roulston, 2008, 2010) and the use of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2021) for the data generated and presented in this report.

Axiology

Axiology, or value theory, tries to bring together aspects of the researcher's values, assumptions and individual perspectives of truth, as well as 'utility, goodness, beauty, right conduct, and obligation' (Hiles, 2008, p. 52). In qualitative research, this is value bound, meaning that the researcher, what is being researched, how it is conducted and why, are not value-neutral (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Dudovskiy, 2022). As outlined before, the knowing-as-being used to co-construct the insights presented in this thesis is deliberate, overt, and driven by a moral duty to consider the reproduction of inequalities experienced by gender/sexual minorities untenable. My work justifies placing belonging as a matter of social justice through the link between learning and epistemic injustices. This means that to make

LGBTQ+ individuals part of inclusive initiatives, we need to explore why there is a need for this, what barriers many of them experience, and what actions we could take as educators to support their need to belong in educational settings. This aligns to feminist ethics (Jaggar, 2001), in that questioning systems of power and oppression ought to be considered a moral practice. There is a further link to my work as teacher educator, in that I argue that this should be part of educators' professional learning. Otherwise, they may not be able to support queer students well, and from a student perspective their sense of belonging could be affected, which could in turn affect their educational experience and outcomes.

My research centres belonging as a guiding principle because the consequences of non-belonging could be detrimental for some. To help with this argument, I use Butler's (2023, para. 9) reflection on morality and solidarity where 'the question of whose lives are worth grieving is an integral part of the question of whose lives are worth valuing'. As highlighted in the literature review, the suicide rates of LGBTQ+ people are alarming, yet it does not make the same headlines in the news, making this loss of life less grievable (Butler, 2004a; 2023b). For this reason, this project is driven by social justice related to the 'ethics of being,' which according to Denzin and Lincoln (2018, p. 76) is anchored in 'justice-as-intrinsic-worthiness'. This contrasts to justice as right order which is procedural and is related to retribution and distribution of goods by institutions to members of a society as their right. Because my work is aligned to individual traits and motivations, as well as conditions and outcomes of belonging, my view of an 'ethics of being' is restorative.

As Powell and Foglia (2014, p. s3) suggest, this is about addressing 'past wrongs in the ways that law, medicine, and society have supported, or failed to support, LGBT people as full citizens in our communities'. A key recommendation that will be put forward in the last chapter of this thesis is a need for educators to enable their students to critically engage with their values and beliefs, to check where the discomforts of being in the presence of a minority comes from, and to recognise more of that shared humanity that is central to belonging (Brown, 2017). Another implication of this, as I argued in queering habitus (Morantes-Africano, 2023, p. 250), is that punishing people for not understanding gender/sexual minorities reproduces cycles of division and resentment; instead, a more compassionate answer is to educate, help them check where is discomfort is coming from, or to share insights from the lived experience of queer ontologies that can be pedagogically powerful.

An example that I use in my personal encounter of discomfort with queer visibility is to share Rawl's (1976) thought experiment of the 'original position', which can be useful to guide ethical action under the principle of the 'veil of ignorance': if we put aside self-interest, biases or the assumption that some groups deserve more than others, we can think of justice as fairness. This, however, does not acknowledge aspects of intersectionality that make decision making dilemmatic. As a thought experiment and when in doubt about whether our reactions towards others are fair, we need to consider not only our opinion of the matter but the outcome for the other person. For example, teachers need to consider not only the fairness of misgendering or deadnaming trans students (see for example, Minchin, 2024), but also how this could impact this person's sense of safety and belonging in the classroom.

Ethics

In addition to the above exploration of values, there were also ethical considerations and practical strategies implemented to ensure the project was conducted with rigour and transparency while protecting people, institutions and fields of knowledge and practice from any form of harm. The below summary combines advice and expectations given to carry out educational research by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018; 2024), University of Glasgow (2018; 2021a; 2022), and MyCampus HE Research Ethics Policy (2023). In addition to these, the ethical guidance for research provided by the LGBT Foundation (2024) guided many of the methodological decisions made for the planning of participant recruitment, data collection, data analysis, and the writing and dissemination of this research. The below is structured around the five main categories recommended by the LGBT Foundation (2024).

1- Integrity and quality

My work is underpinned by a need to explore epistemic injustices rooted in a lack of understanding of queer existence. For this, I asked ten self-identified LGBTQ+ students to reflect whether being LGBTQ+ had any impact on their educational experience. I deem this question not only worthy of being asked but essential to learn how this could advance our understanding of inclusion and belonging. It could make significant epistemic contributions for other marginalised groups, the wider student population, teachers and teacher education, and

other educational researchers. A central consideration to the integrity of my work is using the participants' standpoint to amplify their voice rather than trying to speak on their behalf (LGBT Foundation, 2024).

Regarding the planning of the research, from the outset there was rigour and meticulous planning to gain gatekeeper's approval from my organisation, ethics application processes with both MyCampus and the University of Glasgow and working extensively with my supervisor to ensure protections and strategies were in place before participant recruitment. As appraised by him when endorsing my ethics application for the University of Glasgow ethics panel, 'the moral touchstones here have been consistent with these values and drivers and enshrined in principles of ongoing consent, safety, and exits' (Prof. Bob Davis, March 2023).

The LGBT Foundation (2024) also recommends that researchers should have a proficient level of knowledge of said community from the outset. Gabb (2016) calls this cultural competence related to community knowledge and sensitivity. My lived experience of being queer puts me in an advantageous position here. I also 'came out' in a public forum at my institution as both a political move and a methodological strategy, akin to the approaches used by Lucassen et al. (2017). However, I had to prepare myself around pronouns and inclusive language when talking to and about LGBT people and equality, with GLAAD's (2024) guides being extremely useful. I would recommend the use of these for the professional learning of educators as a matter of ethical and educational practice too.

2- Participant information

Ensuring that everybody involved in my research was fully informed of its purpose, methods, and unintended uses (LGBTQ foundation, 2024) has been a concern from the outset. The preparation for the ethical approval of my research through the University of Glasgow as well as that of my organisation, allowed me to put in place a participant information sheet (see appendix 1), consent forms (appendix 2), a privacy notice (appendix 3) and a draft of the indicative themes and questions to be covered in the interview (appendix 4). This meant making these documents fully available to all involved: my supervisor, organisational gatekeepers, the safeguarding, and student union teams at my organisation who helped me to promote my research, the chairs of the ethics committees, and the students who volunteered to

take part in the interviews. A practical strategy used here was to make these documents a standard attachment to all communications sent as part of my participant recruitment strategy.

As participant consent is paramount for research, I ensured that the documents shared were accessible and used plain and inclusive language (University of Glasgow, 2018, 2021a, 2022). I also included my contact details for potential participants to reach out if they had any questions before agreeing to take part in the interviews. From a cognitive point of view, giving them an idea of the indicative themes and questions was effective as none of the questions was a surprise, my participants came prepared with what they wanted to talk about, and this made the interview process participant led.

3- Confidentiality and anonymity

Due to stigma, queer individuals may be hesitant to take part in research (McCormack, 2014). I was aware that many participants may not be out or did not want others associating them to the topic being researched or the researcher. The participants who agreed to take part in the interviews were self-selected, based on the criteria given in the advertising of my work. To maximise privacy, I carried out interviews in a building within the college but away from where I work or the participants study. Before recording the interviews, I reminded participants of their right to withdraw, what I intended to do with the data collected and how their identity would be fully protected. For this, I asked them to choose a pseudonym before starting the recording; this way guaranteed that transcriptions were de-identified. In the participant information sheet, I highlighted how confidentiality would be maintained within the limits of the law (General Data Protection Regulation, 2018). This meant that I made participants aware that any safeguarding or legal concerns would need to be reported to the relevant channel (MyCampus Safeguarding Policy, 2023). However, none of this had to be actioned during the participant recruitment, interviews or data analysis presented in the next chapter.

Confidentiality is one of the biggest challenges faced by researchers conducting studies with LGBTQ+ participants. If they feel that their gender/sexuality could be used against them, they would be reluctant to take part in research. The National Cybersecurity Alliance (2018) highlights data privacy as crucial for LGBTQ individuals. Therefore, making sure that I offered strong assurances regarding the type of data my research needed but also how it was going to

be analysed and reported, was made clear from the outset. These assurances also involved the recording and storage of data, for which I used secured encryption of online systems (University of Glasgow, 2023) and following advice by BERA (2024, p. 19) only anonymised data has been archived.

I only collected participants' personal information deemed strictly necessary for the purposes of my research. For example, self-identification of gender identity / sexual orientation, and their chosen area of study. This is considered by the Data Protection Act 2018 (Gov.UK, 2018) as sensitive information, and requires stronger legal protection. For this reason, extra care was taken to ensure that all personal data was de-identified at the point of interview. This means, before recording I asked participants to choose a pseudonym and I used it throughout the interview to protect their identity during the data collection, data analysis, writing of this thesis and any subsequent academic disseminations of it (University of Glasgow, 2021b, 2023a).

4 - Voluntary participation

A reflexive approach to understanding how my position as teacher educator and researcher could influence voluntary participation in my research was particularly important throughout. I kept the expressions of interest to take part in my research free of coercion, monetary or any other type of incentive and I also actively avoided encouraging my own students to take part as this could be deemed as coercive behaviour (BERA, 2018, 2024; LGBT Foundation, 2024). I do acknowledge that my social capital played an important part in the participant recruitment, as six of the ten participants knew of me in my capacity as a teacher educator and/or researcher. This meant that some knew me as a teacher, had read my work, attended one of my conference presentations, or had seen my name in communications related to research dissemination.

I am confident that no coercion was exercised, and the participation involved not only their consent but their assent too (BERA, 2024, p. 6). This means that while consent gives permission for the research to take place, assent ensures an informed choice around which topics my participants wanted to talk about, exercising their agency to choose what they wanted to share or omit. During the interviews, it was a matter of respect for me to listen to what they said, and I only interjected when I felt I had something to contribute to co-create meaning from either my experience or my research. As Bridges (2001, p) suggests, research

should be considered a ‘dialogic enquiry designed to assist the understanding of all concerned’. This also aligns to the dialogic approach to interviews endorsed by Roulston (2008; 2010).

5 - Avoiding harm

Ethical research design and implementation aims to put participants at their ease and to avoid making excessive demands on them (BERA, 2024, p. 20). As I was granted ethical approval from both organisations just before the Easter break, I was mindful of students being busy with their studies and final submissions. This meant that I only started interviewing during the months of June, July, and August 2023 to ensure that I was not putting undue pressure on them. I also carefully considered strategies such as involving key agents to ensure care for the self and others involved (Hourani, 2019). For example, I worked with the safeguarding officer at my organisation, who I contacted prior to the participant recruitment to plan ways to support myself and the participants. His experience of dealing with the safeguarding concerns related to queer individuals in the college was extremely valuable and his advice and support was greatly appreciated. We agreed that I would inform him of when and where the interviews were taking place, so that he or somebody from his team would be on standby in case participants needed any emotional or pastoral support due to the sensitive nature of the topics discussed and the recalling of painful experiences.

In addition to the above, I contacted two mental health first aiders who agreed to support me in my role as researcher during the research process. LGBTQ+ research necessitates these types of protections due to the inevitable sensitivities and strong emotional connections to the experiences recalled, making safety a priority for all involved (Grønmo, 2019, p. 60). None of these additional measures were needed but they were in place as a matter of rigour, transparency, and ethics to protect all involved from harm (BERA, 2018; 2024).

Avoiding harm also applies to institutions, and fields of knowledge and practice. For this reason, in addition to participant de-identification, the name of organisations has been anonymised throughout, even in the bibliography. This aims to ensure that participants could freely express their opinion of their educational experience without bringing disrepute to institutions or fields of knowledge or practice.

Participant recruitment

A main strategy for the participant recruitment required for this research was the use of purposive sampling. As defined by Campbell et al. (2020), this is characterised by an alignment to the overall logic of the project, meaning that it is not random but best matching the aims and objectives of the study. I aimed to, and achieved, recruiting ten participants, which could be considered a small sample. However, I was interested to gain depth rather than breadth through the meaning made in the cases analysed (Bisht, 2024). My research participants were self-selected based on the characteristics relevant to the research aim, that is, self-identified LGBTQ+ individuals involved in post-compulsory education who were willing to share their experiences and perspectives of how their identities shaped their journeys in education.

For this I produced and shared a participant information sheet (see Appendix 1), where I outlined who I was, why I was undertaking the research, the key content to be covered during the semi-structured interview and the ethical and safeguarding processes in place to protect participants' identity, dignity, and wellbeing. I was inspired by Lucassen et al.'s (2017) research, which focused on interviewing sexual minority youth about their motivations to take part in research. One of the strategies employed by Mathijs Lucassen as the lead researcher was to be open about his work around child and adolescent mental health. He overtly explained the reasons and motivations for the research, making links to the difficulties he experienced around getting 'gay-affirming help for depression as a queer young person in New Zealand' (p. 19). I adopted a similar approach to give my participants a sense of connection to the topics being discussed, who I was and why I was doing the research, and how their accounts of experience could help my research intentions.

Part of my recruitment strategy was to promote my research via various channels. This included presenting my research proposal at MyCampus HE research conferences in 2022 and an update of the process in 2023. I also involved the Safeguarding, student union, and Research and Scholarly Activity teams at my organisation to disseminate my work via email communications and Microsoft Teams posts to reach as many staff and students as possible. My positioning as a queer teacher educator doing research brought an insider-outsider positionality (Bukamal, 2022), in that pre-empting concerns regarding sensitive aspects of my participants' identities had to be carefully handled. For this, I deliberately established my credentials as a response-able researcher (Barad, 2007) via an openness about how my queer

identity, professional stance, research outputs and personal journey made me inevitably entangled and invested in the processes, topics, and intentions of my research.

Lather's (1991, p. 99) reflection of the meaning of using research participants' lives 'to become "data" to be manipulated in the interest of better theory', made me very aware of the ethical implications for the conducting of research with minoritised groups. It also meant going beyond doing the type of research aligned to the 'documentation of the lives of queer people' (Jackman, 2019, p. 217). My intentions about valuing the standpoint of queer individuals to shape inclusive approaches in education, while being reflexive around ways to represent their experience in a non-exploitative and disrespectful way (Bridges, 2001, p. 371), guided methodological decisions and the conducting of the interviews, which will be discussed in the data collection section. The below summarises some of the data naturally captured through the interviews, which paints a picture of the profile and background of my ten participants while protecting their identity. This sketches the person behind the story, thus resisting the effacement of the author in shared narrative (Bridges, 2003).

Table 1. Research participants' demographics

Pseudonym	Gender identity and/or sexual orientation	Age	Field of study	Additional information disclosed
Mark	Cisman, gay	Early 20s	Health sciences and welfare	
Ted	Cisman, gay	Early 40s	Social sciences and education	Father to two children
Matty	Transman, bisexual	Early 20s	Creative industries and education	Autistic
Dom	Nonbinary, pansexual	Early 30s	Social sciences and education	Autistic
Amanda	Ciswoman, lesbian	Early 30s	Health sciences, welfare, and education	Struggles with labels but uses gay or lesbian
Nick	Cisman, bisexual	Early 20s	Creative industries and education	

May	Ciswoman, bisexual	Early 20s	Creative industries and education	
Dylan	Nonbinary, pansexual	Late 20s	Creative industries and student support	Struggles with labels related to gender/sexuality
Hunter	Nonbinary, bisexual	Early 20s	Creative industries and education	No labels, goes by all pronouns
Blight	Transman, sexuality undisclosed	Early 20s	Creative industries and education	Autistic

As outlined above, even though I actively promoted my research intentions and offered reassurances to participants regarding their confidentiality, voluntary participation and right to withdraw (BERA, 2024), as well as highlighting the benefits that taking part in the research could have on other queer individuals (Lucassen, 2017), nine out of the ten participants who took part in the interviews came from the Arts and Humanities, and one from Sports Science. This means that I had no volunteers from vocational areas such as engineering or construction, which I originally envisaged as part of the sampling to represent the range of subject areas offered by my organisation. However, these type of issues of sampling in the field and gay studies are common (Sullivan & Losberg, 2003).

Despite my efforts to reach widely, the messages sent to staff to be shared with students were perhaps filtered by their own understanding of gender/sexual diversity. Cuthbert et al.'s (2022, p. 781) report a similar experience, as their research on gender diversity meant that many of the gatekeepers involved 'heard our call for participation in terms of dominant understanding of gender as something "about" and "for" only certain types of young people (i.e. those already marked as Othered)'. This precludes an interrogation of the socially constructed nature of gender and how that queer other is socially constructed. This also means that those with the symbolic power to select who gets to access and benefit from opportunities is a key factor in the characterisation of belonging central to this research. For example, if heads of curriculum or teachers thought that none of their students were queer, the potential recruitment in areas such as STEM (science, technology, English and mathematics) or vocational education and training, limited having wider representation in the experiences presented here.

Returning to Lucassen et al.'s (2017) research, I borrowed from their approach the capturing of participant motivations to take part in queer research. These four answers stood out as they share an ethos of solidarity and the role of learning from experience to disrupt inequalities affecting queer lives:

> I am quite passionate about education. I think it's great that you're out there doing something to try and change the perception because I think it's something that I would probably aspire a little bit. I just think it's really nice to see someone representing LGBTQ. I've read your [queering habitus] paper, but I've never met someone doing the work that you do. That's why I wanted to be involved, because I think it's really important and I think it's really needed, to be noticed and recognised. [Ted].

> I think because it's important. Education needs that progression because it's not there. It's really important because when we look back at when we were younger, you do see progress, but it's not fast enough, it's not quick enough, too slow to actually make much of an impact, much of a difference. And given what's been like six, seven years since I've experienced all that stuff, there are still times I look at it and it's like the exact same. It's like the plastic spoon picking away at a cement block and the way that things are going, especially in the media, it's just going backwards. And I don't want people who are like me to go through what I've went through. It's not fair. [Hunter].

> I feel like it's really useful to share insights because you can learn from each other in a sense. I like hearing about how other people have dealt with different things, and gone through different things, and what they've used to help, and how they've coped. I just feel it's useful for me to kind of share my experiences to help too. [Nick].

> I guess it's just in terms of my own experiences. I know that I've had a lot that has had an impact in my life because of the fact that I am bisexual, because of the fact that I am trans, there is impact of what's happened in my life that I feel like it would be beneficial [sharing it]. And also, just like I find the topic inherently interesting, and I think it's a dialogue that does need to be opened up. And if there's anything that I can really do to help with that dialogue, then I will. Just because it's been so impactful for me that if there's anything I can do to kind of help it get better and for there to be, like, a more positive approach to LGBT education, then that's something that I would definitely be willing to do. [Matty].

Overall, the participant recruitment was a positive experience. My strategy of being deliberately present, open, out, and unapologetic about questioning the discourse of inclusion related to LGBTQ+ individuals in our organisation worked well to attract participants who thought that their stories could help others. My stance was a political move to make evident how at the intersection of my identities as researcher, a queer individual, and a teacher

educator, there was a clear intentionality to embrace *who I am*, *what I do* and *why I do it* (Morantes-Africano, 2024), which demonstrates my reflexivity as a researcher too.

Data generation

Instead of seeing data as something that exists and can be collected, as would be the case of a positivist approach to truth that can be discovered, my work uses Lester's (2022) notion of data generation rather than data collection. The semi-structured interviews were designed to be a dialogic process whereby inter-viewing involved a two-way process, rather than a linear one where the researcher's role is to capture the lived experience communicated by participants to be then reported in a research report (Roulston, 2008, 2010). I took this exercise as a form of layering and connecting of information that negotiated what I had been reading, my reflections of what it means for my research, my own experience and personal history, plus the stories that each of my participants gave me. The interviews allowed an initial negotiation of meaning during the unfolding that happens in an in-depth, semi-structured interview (Longhurst, 2009). However, this required a more in-depth engagement via the use of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021), which will be discussed in the next section. These two aspects encompass the *in-action* and *on-action* reflective processes proposed by Schön (1983) as characteristic of a reflective practitioner.

According to Gorman-Murray et al. (2016, p. 101) in queer research we need to consider the 'circuits of social power' facilitated by the interaction of the researcher and the participants. Reflexivity helped with this process. First, when arranging each of the interviews, I followed Brinkmann's (2023) advice ensuring that the participants had access to the privacy notice, participant information sheet and indicative themes and questions (Appendices 1, 2, and 3) in advance. I asked participants to choose what they wanted to talk about and to prepare and use notes if they wanted. This helped to put their mind at ease, empower them to exercise their agency over the process and for some of them feel that their stories had educational value. As my work models inclusive practice, I was mindful of Kenny's (2023) suggestion when carrying out research on inclusive education: researchers must adapt the methods to meet participants' needs. He and his peer researchers (Kenny et al., 2023) advocate for the use of the principles of Universal Design for Learning [UDL] to bring flexibility to the research process. I did this by offering participants the option of doing the interview face to face or online, we negotiated

times where we felt it would not clash with other commitments, and to protect their privacy we explored quiet spaces within the college to carry out the interviews. By offering flexible ways of action and expression, engagement, and representation (CAST, 2024), plus my professional experience of using critical reflexion as a tool to make sense of our experience (Morantes-Africano, 2022), I was confident I could navigate the data generation process.

Each interview started with a reminder to participants of their rights and protections, followed by a brief introduction of the research intentions. Encouraging participants to share aspects of their identity that for many can be private, undisclosed, or highly protected, meant that I had to connect with them on a personal level before starting the recording. My strategy was to share with them my interest in belonging, and how my work questioned the notion of equal opportunities as queer people may have access to educational spaces and groups of people but not always accepted, respected, and supported by those around them. In doing so, I invited them to see the process of 'inquiry as creation' (Mazzei & Jackson, 2023, p. 12). What the participants chose to share makes their accounts of experience, knowledge, and reality 'not something that exists but are brought about' (p. 12). I felt that this approach helped participants to feel they had something valuable to contribute to my work.

Most participants decided to start with question five of the indicative themes and questions: 'do you feel that being from a gender/sexual minority has made an impact on your educational experience?' This allowed me to gauge what type of experience my participant was prepared to share with me. Even though I was curious about some aspects of their stories, I avoided prying or interrogating their stories, as this would be intrusive and unnecessary. The questions outlined in Appendix 3 show how these were deliberately open and avoided being leading. I would consider leading questions a manipulative exercise of what Bridges (2001, p. 381) calls ventriloquy: 'the using of the voice of the participant to give expression to the things which the researcher wants to say or to have said'. Instead, I reminded myself to keep an open mind and to treat the interviews as an opportunity to create not only a safe space but a 'brave space' (Arao & Clemens, 2013) to embrace discomfort, sensitivities, and the sharing of very personal aspects of ourselves.

The responses given in the next chapter illustrate how open my participants were to talk about their journeys, wholeheartedly. It also shows how language helps us not only to externalise our

memories, thoughts and feelings but also create and communicate realities. As Brown (2017, p. xxi) suggests 'language is our portal to meaning-making, connection, healing, learning, and self-awareness. Having access to the right words can open entire universes'. For this reason, the research intentions from the outset tried to balance not only accounts of the past but also imagining possibilities, dreams and aspirations to shape desirable futures. The co-construction of meaning from the experiences of my participants and mine have been central to this entanglement of knowledge-as-being queer. In this way, the data presented here has been an exercise of thinking with and about (Jackson & Mazzei, 2023) our experiences and perspectives. Berger Correa and Ringrose (2023, p. 25) characterises this as a 'material-discursive-affective-sensorial' exercise where all `in thinking/researching are inextricably connected.

Data analysis

According to Clarke (2023), reflexive thematic analysis is not interested in categories but in the patterns of meaning that the researcher identifies and uses to tell a story about their data. To meet my research intentions, I was cautious of pre-empting themes from the data before being gathered, as this would align more to codeword approaches where categories are predetermined from the outset (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021). Instead, I kept experiences and perspectives of my LGBTQ+ participants as the guiding principles to ask questions related to how, if at all, their queer identities and/or expressions shaped their educational journeys. I also used the research aims to interpret and structure what is presented next, in the following order:

1. Analysis of subjective accounts of LGBTQ+ students' educational experience - chapter four, titled *experiences, and perspectives*
2. Interpretation of salient factors to conceptualise student belonging in post-compulsory education - chapter five, titled *dimensions of belonging*
3. Learning from the above for teachers and teaching - chapter six, titled *ethical praxis*

Before that, I outline below the process for the data analysis using the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021), which were used to arrive at the three main categories of interpretation presented in this thesis. This sketch follows Trainor and Bundon's

(2020, p. 724) suggestion to articulate and define 'the theoretical foundations, assumptions, and parameters that guide our work and analysis' as qualitative researchers. Thematic analysis, which is not a singular method but a collection of techniques (Guest, Macqueen & Namey, 2012; Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013) allowed me to analyse not only the participants' accounts, the theories I had been exploring but also my own assumptions. Although aligned to narrative analysis (Reissman, 2005, 2008) that deals with 'stories of experience' (Reissman, 2005, p. 1), reflexivity was key for this in-depth, and complex process. Each of the chapters offers a unique interpretation of the dataset, painting a picture of how the epistemic contributions from the knowers-as-beings engaged in this research navigated, and continue to navigate, their queer ontologies.

1.Familiarisation

My process of data analysis follows Ulmer's (2016) suggestion of a *slow ontology*, as a way of doing research that is more interested with quality than speed, efficiency or number of outputs. As advised by Clarke (2023) it is best not to 'power-through' the process. Instead, I consciously engaged in an iterative and in-depth reflective and reflexive process. The analysis started during the semi-structured interviews where listening to my participants' accounts of experience and their perspectives helped to get a sense of the type of data they were offering. After the interviews were transcribed with the aid of Happy Scribe (2020), I compiled the text and immersed myself with the stories told, highlighting sections, and making annotations of initial impressions and my reflections. This reflective and reflexive reading started with a feeling of newness to the meaning of what the accounts meant in relation to my research intentions, at times feeling like swimming in the middle of the ocean without a clear direction but determined not to drown. However, a second and third reading of the data helped to iteratively connect the qualitative data with what was 'out there' in social life, academic literature, and my own experience, all situated in those spatiotemporalities that Xu (2023, p. 1) proposes are part of queer lived experiences.

2. Coding

As highlighted by Braun et al. (2021) the deliberate use of the word phases rather than stages or steps captures the blurry nature of the process. In my case the familiarisation and coding

happened in parallel. However, many of the initial labels and reflections I added to the transcripts from my participants' interviews changed as I engaged in an in-depth level of analysis that went beyond the descriptive aspects of the data to explore latent meanings within it. For example, some of the initial codes included family influence, witnessing hostility, school / growing up, bullying, outing, and safety, which were attached to experiences. I interpreted their accounts of lived experience as part of their journeys and trajectories. As some participants offered specific examples of inclusive practice, their contributions started to form the conceptualisation of belonging I present in Chapter Five, for example through the codes related to identity and personality. The final research question related to learning for teachers and teaching had practical implications, which were mostly drawn from the perspectives and future directions that some of the participants articulated. In Appendix 5 there is an example of the questions asked during the interviews, and how these align to both the research aims and the categories developed to classify the codes generated during the analysis.

3. Initial theme generation

As the title indicates, there is provisionality in the themes developed from the data. It is important to note how the themes are not discovered, in that these do not already exist but are constructed from the data. The process includes considering multiple sources available up to the point of doing this analysis, from individual accounts, and how these could relate to each other, to the literature reviewed, and to my own experience as the mediator and main interpreter. My process of theme generation meant decision making throughout and critically examining how and why I was interpreting the participants' contributions in the way I did. This involved filtering what I considered was significant and/or aligned to the research intentions, while starting to find common threads between the codes. For example, the accounts that similarly described witnessing and/or experiencing hostility and negative responses about queerness came together under 'heteronormative socialisation,' which I conceptualised as that type of tacit learning that might not be deliberate but starts to form our habitus and dispositions towards our own and others' gender/sexuality (Morantes-Africano, 2023). As my work focuses on understanding belonging, the seven dimensions I put forward in chapter six came from doing a meta-analysis of the theory available while comparing it to the participants' accounts of experience. The last section of data analysis was originally labelled 'implications for initial teacher education,' however it was later reviewed as part of the iterative process of reviewing and refining themes, explored next.

4. Reviewing themes

After deciding to have one small chapter for each of the research aims, the process of theme generation meant I classified transcript extracts that I considered aligned to each of these research intentions, while being aware of Lather's (1990, p. 57) position of reciprocity in feminist and critical research that takes us 'beyond a concern for more and better data'. This means valuing each of the accounts shared by my participants as epistemic contributions while having to keep some aside where I felt they did not align to this knowledge project. The four themes for chapter four had recurring patterns of early socialisation, experiences of discrimination, impact on my participants' educational experience, and a clear contrast between school and college environments. The seven dimensions of belonging in chapter five encompass personal and institutional aspects for LGBTQ+ students' belonging in education. The last section of data analysis available in chapter six takes further my conceptualisation of belonging to propose that it has implications for an educational practice that is aligned to ethical praxis.

5. Defining and naming

This phase happened in parallel with the next one where the 'write up' meant tentatively creating subheadings as themes, deciding what to include and what to omit from the participants' accounts. This meant having a longer version of the themes with all the extracts that I considered important to be included before editing these. For example, for the first research aim related to experiences and perspectives, the first theme of 'heteronormative socialisation' encompasses learning experiences of what it means to be queer from an early age, which included learning from home and school environments. In a way, chapter four deals with mostly descriptive data, whereas the conceptualisation of belonging I offer in chapter five engaged in the latent meaning of the data, involving an inductive process of analysis that situates the participants' accounts and my own within social practice, and the literature explored in chapter two. The chapter titled ethical praxis sums up the learning from the previous two chapters, highlighting the critical and ethical drive of my work.

6. Writing the report

The favouring of first-person accounts in the analysis presented next addresses a long-lasting concern of a crisis of representation that has epistemological and ethical implications for qualitative inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 42; Lincoln & Denzin, 1998, pp. 20-22). The queer ethos of my project adopts a critical and political stance to amplify the voices of minoritised individuals, which I argue could offer valuable epistemic contributions to the collective interpretive tools needed to navigate social life, including education as my main field of practice. This does not suggest fully endorsing any of the accounts presented here as truth but seeks to invite contemplation into what these stories mean for us and others, prompts towards solidarity and a reflection about ways in which we can plant the seeds of trees whose shadow we may not see in our lifetime, but our future generations will. Change can be slow, but it is possible.

Chapter four: experiences and perspectives

This chapter deals with accounts related to the lived experience of ten LGBTQ+ students in relation to how, if at all, their queer identity and expression shaped their educational journey. To address research aim one, related to the interpretation of the educational experience of my participants, four key themes were generated from the interview data using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019; 2021):

1. Heteronormative socialisation: my participants' learning of issues of acceptance related to queerness started at an early age, mostly influenced by their family, classmates, and teachers in school.
2. Symbolic violence: participants account experiencing and/or witnessing rejection, bullying and the impact of being outed by others, mostly during their formative years at school.
3. Impact: heteronormative expectations and the symbolic violence experienced by my participants led some to feel that school was not a safe and supportive environment for them or other queer individuals.
4. Post-compulsory education: college positively contrasted previous experiences of acceptance, respect, support and belonging.

To negotiate a way to maintain the fidelity of the participants' voice while keeping the presentation as cohesive as possible, I borrow from Dr. Welsh (2024, p. 96) the notion of using extracts from the transcripts 'to honour their life histories'. Some are long; however, a standpoint epistemology needs exactly this type of political move to give silenced voices the space to be heard.

Heteronormative socialisation

The first theme focuses on the socially constructed messages of right/wrong gender identity and gender expression that we absorb from our environment growing up. This socialisation includes what we personally experience but also what we witness around family, and peers and teachers in school. For example, Ted, who at the time of the interview was 41, shared a bit of history about his upbringing at home:

> My dad was born in the sort of Second World War era, and was very well, I'd probably say homophobic. Certainly around that time when I was at school, he would just sort of try and make us less feminine, because I would sort of stand in a certain way or I would have my hand on my hip and obviously my voice was a little bit higher then, he was trying to correct me, but I think that was just because that was the way he was brought up, so [growing up] there was nothing for me about [LGBTQ+] education [Ted].

As a response to this, I shared with Ted similar views. Even though I am from a vastly different culture, my experience of socialisation meant invisibility of queer existence in the sociocultural environment where I grew up:

> I'm 43, I was born in a very small town in the middle of the Andes, a very close-knit community, catholic, so it was really not the place where you can have queerness or difference or diversity to learn from. I learnt that I was different because others kept pointing it out, but I could not see it or understand it myself. I internalised that there was something inherently wrong with me because my teachers and students kept picking on me for not being like the other boys, especially my physical education teacher who bullied me for not being masculine enough to fit his standards and I hated the subject because of that experience. [Leo].

I would interpret these two experiences of being 'corrected' by our parents or teachers as a part of a socially constructed and culturally bound normativity of gender that we receive as children. In queering habitus (Morantes-Africano, 2023), I articulated this as symbolic violence, in that a heteronormative habitus, or the learnings of right and wrong gender identity and performance that we get from others, is imposed on us. As Yep (2003, p. 13) asserts, this is when heterosexuality 'constitutes *the* standard for legitimate, authentic, prescriptive, and ruling social, cultural, and sexual arrangements, it becomes heteronormativity' (emphasis in original). In the case of learning from the people immediate to us at home and in school, we directly or indirectly develop a sense of being queer as pathological, unnatural, unintelligible, deviant and therefore undesirable (Yep, 2002). This applies to all, not only queer people, leaving many with long-lasting dispositions towards gender/sexual difference that if unquestioned can lead to asymmetrical positionings in social life around who deserves dignity and respect as people.

When children and young people are exposed to a heteronormative morality, the way they treat each other can lead to tensions or even hostility. One of the codes (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun et al., 2019) that was salient for my participants' experience in education was that of *acceptance*, especially during their secondary schooling years:

> I think because my gender identity was something that I came to terms with a lot later, that was something I didn't really have to navigate during that time period with my sexuality. I went to an all-girl Catholic school, so you can imagine they were not very accepting. And I think that is probably why it took me so long to even entertain the idea of having a different gender identity, because for years I was told, no, you can't be queer, you can't like girls, you can't like both. So, then it kind of just shut that part off in my brain. And I've always had sort of heteronormative appearing relationships, those queer relationships that I have had, I haven't been as open about, which is a shame. So, yeah, I think it sort of hindered me when I was younger, but as I got older, I realised that actually that is other people's insecurities that I'm then manifesting. [Dom].

> There were, like, some slurs being thrown at me just out of what they called ironic humour fun. Yeah. It wasn't a pleasant experience, and it made me realise like, wow, this is the thing that I was afraid of when coming out. And I knew that the school wasn't going to help a lot with it. [Mark].

> My coming out experience? Horrific. When I came out, it wasn't I was going to say it wasn't as big, but it wasn't as kind of out there and it was still a bit of a taboo to talk about. Not so much now. It's getting spoken about more. [Amanda].

> We're talking about like ten years ago now. It wasn't as widely kind of accepted or really known about that then. I just feel like it was a bit of a hindrance, whereas obviously something a bit more recent education wise, it obviously has been a lot more accepting and a lot more inclusive. [Nick].

Issues of acceptance are, by definition, salient for the development of a sense of belonging. Many participants assigned ignorance, or what I articulated before as a 'hermeneutical injustice' (Fricker, 2007), as part of the root cause for the responses of people around how to interpret and respond to queerness. This type of injustice is related to intelligibility. For example:

> In secondary school, I noticed that a lot of my peers weren't exactly the most well informed about any matters to do with LGBTQ. Plus, there was so much ignorance and that was just all throughout the school. I could sense it amongst the teachers as well. And so, I found that throughout education, right until the very end, I was very much closeted and closed off. I felt that I had to put on this personality of being this macho, straight guy, and I felt like I couldn't express myself a lot. [Mark].

> I'm 41, so I kind of came out when I was 21. When I was in education, there was certainly nothing around anything [LGBTQ+ related]. I mean, yes, there was stuff that you've seen on the TV, but in education, there was nothing, certainly nothing at all. There were lots of names thrown around in school, and I didn't even know what kind of gay meant at that age. [Ted].

In one of the interviews, I shared a similar perspective: 'I resonate exactly with your experience about ignorance. I don't think sometimes people do it out of maliciousness or trying to be funny. Most of the time it's out of ignorance'. [Leo].

Imposed heteronormativity, silencing queer voices and their ability as epistemic agents has been part of education structurally. Recent examples include the Cass Review (Cass, 2024), which Horton's (2024) considers part of the cis supremacy in the UK. However, Ted recalls from his childhood that,

> thinking around the 80s, with the Thatcher era, and section 28… I was doing a bit of reading around how things were. Anything to do with any LGBT was banned in schools. I think the main thing that I remembered reading about was a book around two dads that was completely banned out of any school, I think, around that time. So, they were trying to wipe it out almost. And then obviously, I guess the era around HIV and AIDS as well, it was quite a taboo subject, I think. [Ted].

A salient concept from this first theme is that of acceptance, which is fundamental for humans to develop a sense of belonging. A heteronormative socialisation affects everybody, meaning that the development of dispositions towards right/wrong gender expression deserves extra attention as a potential barrier to honouring queerness not as deviant but as difference in human diversity.

Symbolic violence

This section builds on the previous theme of heteronormativity to posit the concept not only as an ideology but as a practice of symbolic violence which affects LGBTQ+ individuals' sense of belonging. Any imposition of canons of right and wrong gender identity and expression on children and young people means that while some may find their gender identity and

performance comfortable and natural, many others experience external hostility, conflict, and rejection. Issues of LGBTQ+ exclusion in education ought to be considered a serious concern (Amnesty International, 2021; Herek, 2004; Sundberg et al., 2021). A worrying issue is that non-queer individuals may feel validated in abusing queer counterparts due to a lack of interpretive tools for comprehending what queer existence feels like. In this way, they are victims themselves of hermeneutical injustices (Fricker, 2007), in that the symbolic violence that they inflict on queer classmates could be part of a received heteronormativity, not a fully considered response to queerness. For example, Matty and Dylan, both trans individuals, experienced bullying from peers in school to the point where they felt unsafe, affecting their sense of school belonging:

> Kids are cruel. Kids are really cruel. But there was also, I remember really distinctively, that I went to a teacher, and I was like: this is happening, I'm becoming quite scared, actually. I don't want to come to school. I'm becoming scared to come to school. And their response was, well, why would you come out then? Why would you? This is your own fault. And I remember just being like, oh, god, this is something I'm going to have to pack away because there's no space for this here… I had this really awful relationship with education where school was not a safe place for me. At one point, at the height of me being unwell with my mental health, I didn't leave my house for six weeks because the concept of having to go to school and knowing that I was queer, I was fat, I was ginger, there was just so much about me that was a bit of a playground for bullies, and I couldn't face it… I more or less stopped going to school when I was about 14. My mom got plenty of fines and things like that, and it wasn't like a defiant thing of, I didn't want to go, I was terrified of having to go. [Dylan].

> It really made things difficult in terms of feeling safe when I was in high school. When I got to about year ten, I got put on a part time timetable because of the amount of flak that I would get for identifying that way. It would just be a weakness in their eyes. So, I just wanted to stay away from the school as much as possible. [Matty].

Both Matty and Dylan account how peers outed them. I consider this symbolic violence as they not only did not consent to this, but peers use their gender/sexual difference as a vulnerability to be used against them:

> Some people aren't going to understand and lash out. I wasn't initially out, but I had came out to a friend and then that friend had told more people and obviously that spread like wildfire. So, I was put in quite a vulnerable position at that stage where, especially in classes such as PE, where people would make comments and stuff like that, about the

> fact that I was trans, the fact that I was bisexual, and they would see it as like a weakness. [Matty].
>
> I was outed by somebody that I knew at school. It kind of then spread like wildfire. I unfortunately experienced some horrendous homophobic bullying, something that I carry a lot of trauma from, unfortunately. Things such as being followed home, being terrorised on buses and even on weekends and stuff. So, being terrorised when I was out and about if I saw anybody from school, it just totally made my life a misery. [Dylan]

Both used the same metaphor of 'spreading like wildfire' to describe how their gender identity and sexual orientation was used against them. This type of analogy was useful to identify this experience as a theme (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Nick offers a similar perspective of his sexuality being 'used against' him:

> There wasn't really many other people who were similar… in my case, not a lot of people knew, but I feel like people sensed it in a way and sometimes it was used against us. That was a lot more in secondary school. It was nothing to do with teaching wise or what I was learning, it was just more to do with other students in the class [Nick].

As outlined in the literature review, unfortunately bullying continues to be a main reason for LGBTQ+ students having a challenging time fully belonging in school, due to lack of acceptance, respect, value and/or support from peers and teachers. For example, Hunter and Blight specifically mention teachers not offering them enough support regarding the bullying they experienced:

> When I was in year seven, I was being bullied by a kid in year nine. And he would relentlessly, at breaks, bully me and say horrible things to me. But as soon as I took a mug shot of him, like a picture of him in the yard and took it to the year leader, saying, this is the kid that's been bullying me, home went, you can't do that. You can't be taking pictures of other students. I was like, I'm showing you the kid that's bullying me. And he's like, you can't be taking pictures of other students. That's against his privacy. And I'm like, oh, but bullying me is fine, is it? And it would happen in year nine with the two that would bully me, all that they would do is give them a detention. And that just made it worse with the bullying. They came and egged my house because I got them put in detention. It doesn't do anything but make it worse. [Blight].
>
> I was bullied a lot during school, but when I came out as bi and people then knew I had a girlfriend at the time, it was like, suddenly there was a lot more attention on me. And it didn't seem that any teachers kind of picked up on that, or they did, they just tried to brush it off as nothing. But there was definitely a lot more attention. I was getting stopped in class by other students asking me ridiculous questions, things like, how can

> you be bi and Christian? And I was like, well, what does my religion have to do with my sexuality? I don't understand it. [Hunter].

As a trans person, Blight reports additional symbolic violence through being deadnamed and misgendered by peers and, in one case, a college teacher. An example that shows that the problem is not limited to schools:

> One student used to call me and another [trans] friend, we'll refer to him as M, used to call us 'it'. Because one time earlier in the year, I got accidentally deadnamed on the register - because the teacher didn't know - he then knew my dead name and would use it and would refer to me as she and an 'it' and then M also as an 'it.' I brought this up with the tutors and they didn't do anything about it in college, in level three college. [Blight].

An additional aspect of imposition that participants commented on was school policies around gendered uniforms that made some of them feel vulnerable (Friederick, 2021; Phelps, 2021; Reidy, 2021; Shanks, 2023). For example, Matty offered that,

> in high school, everyone was forced, of course, to wear the same sort of uniform. And I think uniforms themselves limit expression a lot and especially because it can be such a form of conformity in itself. I know there's a lot of reasoning behind it for safety of students so that they can recognise them all right. [Matty].

This second theme shows that any imposition of right/wrong gender identity and expression is a form of symbolic violence. Through the examples given above we start elucidating how both the abuser and the abused may be trapped in a received heteronormative discourse that threatens social interactions. This is concerning for educational practice, as queer students experiencing rejection would find it extra challenging to develop a sense of connection to those who reject them, or feel that they belong in the contexts where they experience and/or witness hostility.

Impact: unbelonging and anxiety

After exploring heteronormativity as an ideology, and symbolic violence as a practice that many queer individuals experience from those around them, this section explores the impact

that this has for belonging. Three main salient aspects are constructed from participants' contributions: migration from places where they did not feel welcomed, physical exclusion from the school, and long-lasting anxiety because of traumatic experiences.

On the last category, related to trauma, I reiterate that the type of lived experience this project is interested in is not that of one-off instances but those that through reoccurrences shape our identity, value, and sense of belonging. For example, Matty recalls how he was put on an alternative timetable since the bullying he experienced as a trans student was serious and some teachers did not offer enough support for him to belong in school:

> They generally seem to have no care or respect for the students. I did have some good lecturers and that's kind of what helped me through high school. I feel like if I didn't have them then I don't know what I would have done. But there was a lot of them that were just kind of trying to brush it under the rug. Me being put on that timetable that I was when I got further in my education, that was because I literally had students threatening to hunt me down and kill me. They did nothing about those students. Not a thing was done with them. All they said was, we'll just take you out of it and then call it a day. Because they just didn't want to bother with any of that. And also, it makes them, I would assume it would, look bad if they have that kind of a person in their school. So, they just tried to take me out of the equation. Even outside of LGBTQ stuff, I had a lot of physical health problems at the same time with my skin and everything, stuff that took two years to get sorted by the school because they just didn't want to deal with it. So, it was a really hard experience to go through. Glad that I'm out of it now and glad that I'm mostly over it, but it definitely took a lot of healing after getting out of that environment, just because that was what I was used to and that's what I expected from everyone at that point. But then I just realised, oh, no, this was just a really bad environment. Like, not everything is like this. [Matty].

Similarly, Dylan, who is also a trans person, was excluded from school too. They felt that their teachers showed little support or affirmative approaches to his identity, or how to navigate the struggles he experienced with peers:

> I more or less stopped going to school when I was about 14. My mom got plenty of fines and things like that, and it wasn't like a defiant thing of, I didn't want to go, I was terrified of having to go and having to kind of show up as myself. There was meant to be a deal made where I was meant to go back for certain lessons and stuff, but I think it just came to a point where the school were like, it's easier for us if you're just not here type of thing, not that I was particularly badly behaved. I was very vocal, that I was, because I had family who were queer and things like that. I was like, I know that this is not okay. It is not okay that these kids, students, treat me like this, and you're allowing it to happen, and I don't understand why that is. And they were just a bit like, well, our kids are cruel. There wasn't really enough kind of done about it for me to feel safe, to

> integrate back into education. So, I ended up having a couple of years of just this. It was before the laws around having to stay in education until you were 18. It was kind of like, you got to 16 and it was like, well, that's it. You're off on your own now. [Dylan]

For Ted, leaving school was a matter of safety too. His sense of belonging was affected by peer interactions:

> I left school at 16, and one of the reasons it was around the bullying, and I didn't want to stay on. I kind of got a job, and I worked in kennels right from the age of 17. [Ted].

For Mark, leaving school was a matter of wellbeing:

> lockdown happened and that gave me a space for me to open up. But in terms of education, I knew that I needed to get out of that environment because it was just not healthy for me. [Mark]

Blight also recalls feelings of uneasiness related to people who made them feel uncomfortable in school:

> If you've got a negative set of people or a negative person, you don't necessarily want to be in the room with them. It's the same thing with bullies and stuff if you're in a class. This was the exact same thing I had in secondary school all throughout my year nine, with the way the bands were and the sets and stuff. My classes would predominantly be music, drama, art, sort of, and languages, where I would always be with two of my main bullies, and I did not want to go into any of them classes because they would be in them. So, it does put a real negative effect on what you're learning. [Blight].

The topic of impact on mental health was clearly a second aspect discussed by participants, mostly related to their experience of not feeling accepted, respected, or supported in school. For example, Dylan and I reflected on anxiety as a trauma response:

> The anxiety**…** you feel it physically. Yeah, it gets caught in your chest, you can't breathe. I would hyperventilate on the bus to school, and I would cry. And it came to a point where my family were having to drive us to school and they'd be like, come on, get out. And I would be, like, shaking in the car and be like, no, I am not going. I was like, you will have to drag me into that building before I am willing to go in there. And I guess I don't know, there's probably a conversation there as well about mental health and stuff, but people sort of don't realise how this type of stuff, it sticks with you and trauma gets caught in the body. It sticks in your heart, in you, depending on how it

> affects you. When you're presented with similar situations, you go straight back to that place and that's the rest of your life, you see. [Dylan].

My experience of anxiety related to my upbringing as a queer individual in a hostile environment and it made me realise how it filters my perception of other queer people, especially queer youth. During one of the interviews, I shared the following with one of the participants:

> I think your experience resonates a lot with something that I've been exploring around anxiety. My anxieties, in a way, are responses to my [queer lived] experience and this in turn filters my perceptions and reactions: whenever I see a queer person, my mind goes to the anxiety of, are you okay? Have you been bullied? Are you respected? Are you supported? Do you have a loving family? Do you have a network of friends? All of that is inevitable for me.
>
> There is also the anxiety of going into spaces where I feel I may not be able to be myself. I definitely have a different persona that is very much a façade. It's a very conscious decision to try and hide the queerness so there is less of a risk of being picked on or, I don't know, maybe feel uncomfortable or making others feel uncomfortable, but in a way, it's an ability that some of us have, but not everybody is able to do that kind of chameleonizing. This, I call it chameleonize. Because of having to adapt to your surroundings to feel safe, you become a chameleon. You kind of assess the environment and you kind of try to blend rather than be you because you are too much for some people. [Leo].

Anxiety, stemming from the constant reinforcement that a queer existence belongs in the closet, places shame as a factor shaping a queer onto-epistemology. This means that internalising queerness as unwanted, deviant, or wrong, results in queer individuals experiencing existential crises. They wrestle not with the notion of *I have done something wrong*, associated with guilt, but with *I am wrong*. As will be explored later, affirming queer identities as intrinsic, natural and not susceptible to be changed can be life changing for queer youth.

Post-compulsory education: new environment and new opportunities

In contrast to the mostly challenging experiences of my participants in secondary education, a clear theme discussed by nearly all of them was finding post-compulsory education as a

positive, and for many, transformative experience. For example, Matty and Mark's account of experiencing acceptance, respect and feeling welcomed was new to them as they had mostly experienced the opposite during their secondary school years:

> …it was so much different coming into a college setting where, I don't know, I was so reluctant to kind of engage with anybody when I got there because I was so used to what I experienced in high school. But the people there were just so welcoming and friendly towards us that I was like, hang on, what's going on here? It really caught me off guards to begin with. [Matty].

> So, I actually went to [anonymised] Sixth Form College, not too far from here, and that itself was just such an eye opener for me. I came in like a very anxious person and it just gave me a space to view what healthy relationships were, to meet people that I could relate to, meet people that shared values with me and also people that just respected me. It took a moment to warm up because I think just coming out of such a strange environment where I almost felt alienated and that. I'm quiet. I almost felt as if I couldn't be myself, like there was something wrong with me. To go into education over there [at the Sixth Form] and to now feel confident in my sexuality and feel happy with the way that I dress, the way that I can express myself without fear of judgement, that's definitely changed. [Mark].

I replied to Mark with a bit of background about how contrasting my secondary school experience was compared to when I went to university too:

> I am invested in education because of my own educational experience. How different it was, how transformative it was to be in university where I could be myself. I found myself, I became a better human. I learned so much about myself. I completed a degree in design and actually my best design was my own transformation. I made beautiful things and projects and all sorts of objects but designing myself, my identity, my personality, my values, finding all of that and kind of reinventing what I knew about myself was empowering. That person that I was in school was very different to the person I became through university. Some of my teachers had a lot to do with this, I am forever grateful with the way they affirmed my queer identity and accepted, supported, and respected me. I think that is why I do what I do in teacher education. [Leo].

This idea of history and experiences informing our professional interests, was articulated by Mark in this way:

> I think the course in counselling itself was also quite heavily affected by my educational experience. So, I noticed that from the change of high school to the sixth form, what I noticed was a lot more, like, I felt a lot more human connection with people. And I started to feel like a lot more warmth and empathy to people. And I felt

> like I could be honest. And I realised that's something, like that compassion for others, is something that I really valued. And going into counselling itself, I found, was a way for me to be able to help people, because I know, especially in high school, I would have needed a counsellor. And I can see how important of a role that it is, especially for queer people. [Mark].

The theme of understanding others and considering their habitus was discussed with a few participants. On the theme of inadvertently learning about what others think of queer people when we are not queer presenting, I offered some reflections:

> I think that you are kind of an insider, because if you're not out to colleagues and they start making comments and jokes and so on, you kind of understand what they actually think. But people would probably regulate a lot more if they knew that you probably are LGBT, or identify, or you have a different take on that; because people do regulate a lot of that, based on context or who's around them. [Leo].

To this, May replied: I've never experienced that in the college, ever.' This reassurance was positive to hear and resonated with Dylan's experience of acceptance in college.

> Since I've left school, I haven't experienced that much sort of backlash off the back of my sexuality. I came out as nonbinary when I was 24. Now most people kind of hear that I'm pan[sexual], and they just go, all right, nobody bats an eye for me. [Dylan].

Matty also offered a contrasting view of secondary school where he experienced hostility versus college where he felt connection with those around him:

> Everyone got along really well in that course, and it was a nice environment to have, it didn't feel hostile. It didn't feel like everyone had their own little groups or anything like that. Everyone was just super supportive of each other from day one and it was finally nice to be in an environment like that. So, I guess you could say that obviously while secondary school was like a negative impact in terms of me being a minority in education, being able to move into a college setting where people either have experienced it before, so they understand or they just respect, it was such a nice difference to have. [Matty].

To this, I replied with a reflection about the sense that I was making between the theories of belonging and my participants' accounts of their experiences of inclusion in education:

> This is what fascinates me about belonging. This is about feeling, isn't it? You step into a place and sometimes you feel that you are accepted and respected, or otherwise. It is difficult to rationalise, but there is a sense and a feeling of safety and that could lead to feeling that we belong but could also signal that we are not welcomed and prompt us to not want to belong there. It is interesting and frankly for me unexpected that so many people talk about the college being a welcoming environment for them. [Leo].

Matty continued reflecting of how college helped him to affirm his identity and confidence in himself as a trans person.

> It definitely made a difference. It definitely helped with the confidence and stuff like that as well. Something that I feel like I [had] completely lost. I used to be like a very confident child going into my teen years, I pretty much lost it all. And then coming into college, it feels like I was slowly building that back up again, which was nice. My dad would say it was all the time. It was such a standout part of my personality. It was just like how boisterous I was, essentially. But the idea of gaining that back was very nice. And I feel like this college has definitely helped with that. [Matty].

These accounts fuelled my desire to further understand belonging, not only for LGBTQ+ students but for all. The next section presents the framework I developed to make sense of both the theories of belonging outlined in the rationale and my participants' accounts of inclusion / exclusion, acceptance / rejection, respect / hostility, and support / neglect experienced in their education so far.

Chapter five: dimensions of belonging

This chapter departs from the mostly descriptive data presented in the previous chapter to engage in the latent meaning of the accounts shared by participants for inclusive education practice. The data analysis was an iterative process that considered the literature review, the theories of belonging explored, and the epistemic contributions of my participants and mine. This allowed me to develop a framework for student belonging in post-compulsory education (fig. 1), which I developed as part of the reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019; 2021) and which I applied to make sense of the qualitative data offered by my participants in their capacity of knowing-as-being queer. It answers research question two related to how the learning from LGBTQ+ students' experiences and perspectives could inform inclusive practice. It serves as an intermezzo before exploring how the framework was constructed from the participants' contributions. Before that, I appraise Allen et al.'s (2021) 'integrative framework of belonging', which provides a useful synthesis of some of the theories, models, and frameworks of belonging already discussed in the rationale of this thesis. They propose four interrelated components:

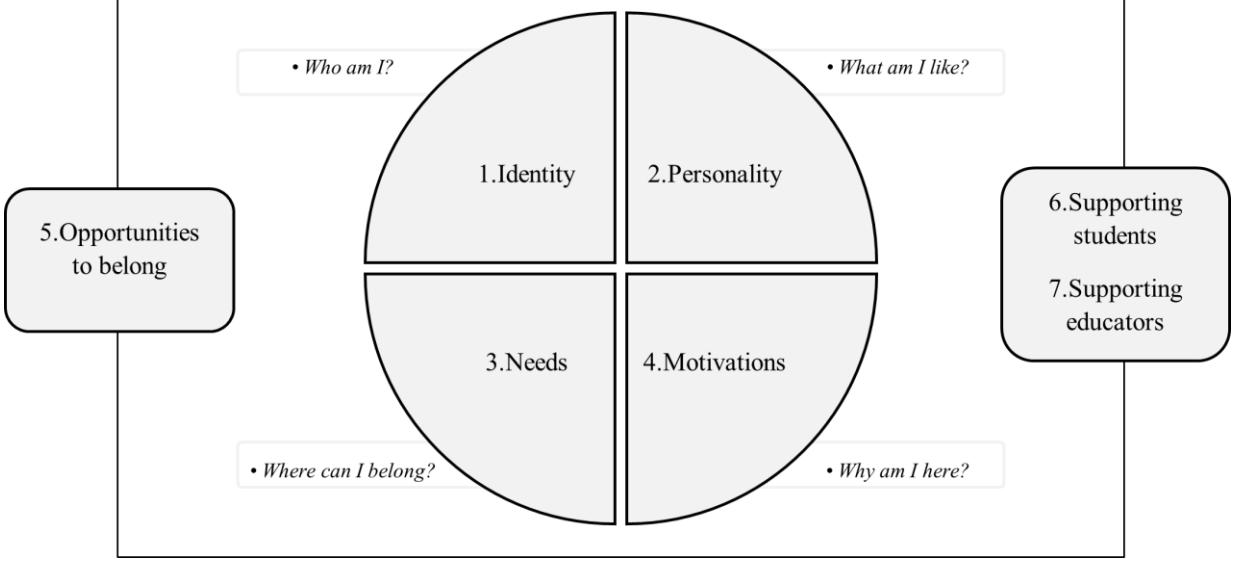
- Competencies for belonging: the skills and abilities (both subjective and objective) needed to connect, and experience belonging, relate with others, identify with a cultural background, develop a sense of identity, and connect to places. Competencies enable people to ensure their behaviour is consistent with group social norms, cultural values and treat places and land with respect.
- Opportunities to belong: the availability of groups, people, places, times, and spaces that enable belonging. The ability to connect with others is useless if opportunities to connect are lacking, for example when a person may have social competencies but are placed in rural or isolated areas.
- Motivations to belong: the fundamental need for individuals to be accepted, belong, and seek social interactions and connection. Socially, a person who is motivated to belong enjoys positive interactions with others, seeks out interpersonal connections, dislikes negative social experiences and resists the loss of attachment.
- Perceptions of belonging: the subjective feelings and understandings of own experience. This encompasses the three above, as a person who may have competencies, opportunities to belong, and be motivated, may still report

> dissatisfaction. There is an innate human ability to evaluate whether they feel they belong or fit in with those around them.

What I synthesised from the above, and from the most comprehensive articulations of belonging (Brown, 2017; Carter et al., 2016; Goodenow, 1993b; Greenway, 2023; Korpershoek et al., 2019; K. Thomas, 2019; L. Thomas, 2012; Wheaton College, 2023), is that there are two main interconnected spheres that make belongingness possible: the personal (identities, personality, social skills, motivations, perceptions, values), and the external objective conditions (access to education, opportunities, policies, legislative frameworks, institutional strategies). Given that Allen et al.'s (2021) is a meta-analysis of many theories, principles, and models, it was the most influential for the in-depth reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019; 2021) I constructed from my participants' epistemic contributions. However, as it is not focused on education it does not consider key factors that tie in inclusive practice in education with student belonging. It does not consider the role of educators as pivotal actors in enabling the belonging of students in education either, which my framework considers, and I offer as a unique contribution to the wealth of literature available on this topic.

As my thesis focuses on nuances related to LGBTQ+ individuals, and how learning from their experiences and perspectives could help us shape inclusive practice in post-compulsory education, the framework I developed is inevitably delineated by the research objectives in mind. This means that the examples given below use my participants' epistemic contributions, generated from our knowing-as-being subjectivities. However, I take the view of UNESCO (2020) that inclusive practice in education means all, and all means all. Therefore, the framework I present here can be interpreted and/or adapted to be applied across a range of educational contexts. In this way, I invite the reader to think about the questions I pose below regarding our individual identities, personality, sense of belonging and motivations, while reflecting on their environment in relation to the opportunities and support received or given to others to enable a sense of belonging.

Fig 1. Framework of the personal and institutional dimensions of belonging in education



My framework regards the complexity and intersectionality of belonging as the interplay between subjectivities (the four aspects included in the circle), and the external conditions and factors that are needed to enable it (opportunities and support). In this way, the model proposes a relationship between the individual and their situatedness. Neither can exist independently for true belonging to occur, akin to the perceptions of belonging formulated above by Allen et al. (2021).

Learners joining or aspiring to join post-compulsory education are on a journey of being and becoming. The former is to be understood as intrinsic, such as our core identity and basic human needs, which are part of our nature. In addition to these, we have our personality and motivations, both of which are susceptible to change, therefore are part of our becoming. These subjective aspects (identity, personality, needs and motivations) are contingent to the external structures that influence our lived experience, such as the learning environment and the institutional approaches to support or otherwise minoritised individuals. The interplay of our identity and personality, with our needs and motivations, becomes a dance of internal and invisible aspects of ourselves, and those that we exteriorise, either as a choice or as a strategy to navigate complex social life. The situatedness of minoritised individuals in a predominantly heteronormative social practice places an extra onus on education to address injustices and inequalities, therefore both opportunities and support are necessary to foster a feeling of acceptance, respect, value, and support for queer lives. Aspects of support concern both

educators and students, as caring for those who care is central to my argument that belonging is a matter of justice.

1. The personal dimensions of belonging

I start at the centre of the framework with the four personal, subjective aspects of belonging, which I argue are essential considerations for education and educators to enact inclusive practice. If we do not know who our students are, what their goals and aspirations are, as well as what strengths and areas for development they bring to the course they are about to study with us, we may fall into unhelpful assumptions and not support a positive student experience.

- Identity: As my thesis is interested in exploring hermeneutical injustices, clarifying that a queer individual did not choose their sexual orientation exchanges the metaphor of choosing to be gay/lesbian/bisexual for one where we simply are born this way. In understanding this unique 'hard-wired' configuration we can posit that aspect of our core identity as non-fungible. Despite the 'medical, psychiatric, psychological, religious, cultural or any other interventions that seek to change, "cure," or suppress the sexual orientation and/or gender identity of a person' (Ban Conversion Therapy, 2024, para. 2), we ought to approach the subject with facts and not opinions or widely held misconceptions. The guiding question for us to consider is *who am I?* There are many layers of our identity, some of which come from external influences and are part of our biography, while some are part of our nature. Differentiating these two can elucidate ways to be more kind, compassionate and understanding of one another.

- Personality: in addition to the above interplay of what is our essence and nature, plus external influences that inform our identity, we have the unique patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving. While most of our identity is internal and invisible, our personality can be interpreted as our expression and exteriorisation of what is inside us. Whether we are introverted and shy, or sociable and outgoing, the development and application of social skills are essential components for belonging. To reflect on how we come across in social practice, the guiding question to consider is *what am I like?* As will be discussed below, many individuals compromise core aspects of their identity

and expression to feel accepted by peers. Orne (2003) suggests that queer individuals adapt their behaviour when they feel they are 'on the line of fire'. I call this chameleonizing, as a personal strategy where being able to read a room, analyse people's reactions to my behaviour and gauge how safe it would be to share aspects of my identity means a constant process of negotiation.

- Needs: as the focus of this thesis is constructing a case to consider LGBTQ+ students part of inclusive initiatives, the notion of belonging as a fundamental need requires contextualising it within the complex mesh of fundamental human needs. Here aspects of connection, relationships, and feeling seen, valued, accepted, respected, and supported by peers and teachers are salient. These are aspects closely related to other fundamental needs. The guiding question related to the research intentions is, *where do I belong?* For this reason, I use Maslow's (1943, 1954) broad categories of basic needs to illustrate how these relate to our students and offer practical advice to address them.

- Motivations: This fourth aspect of the subjective conceptualisation of belonging highlights our drive to wanting to be part of a group of people, join a community of learning or practice, undertake a programme of study, or start to develop a professional identity in each subject area. Of course, choices and opportunities to pursue our dreams may be limited, or in the case of youth in the UK be mandated by law to be in Education, Employment or Training (Department for Education, 2024). The guiding question here is, *why am I here?* Additional guiding questions could be, what moves me? Do I want to associate myself to this group of people, field, or academic institution? What do I need to do to develop my future professional identity or employability? Our motivations change and getting appropriate advice and guidance, or inspiration could influence our motivations to belong.

2. The institutional dimensions of belonging

Here the emphasis is on the factors outside the individual, which determine the conditions for participation, engagement, and sense of belonging in education. This dimension is heavily influenced by social justice, as placing the onus on a person to thrive without support can be counterproductive, especially when the discourse of equal opportunities may not consider that a

queer ontology has unique challenges that need to be highlighted to address the epistemic injustices central to this thesis.

- Opportunities: this is the first aspect of the external factors to be considered for students to belong in education. Being admitted to the programme of study opens the door to our journey to become the professional we want to be. Here aspects of gendered fields of knowledge and practice are salient as potential barriers to pursuing one's dream. Representation matters, being prepared to be a minority is part of a queer ontology. Therefore, equal opportunities to access education without support is an incomplete strategy to support the student experience and gain positive outcomes.

- Support for students: aspects of support have been highlighted as essential for belonging, especially for non-traditional students moving on to higher education (Thomas, 2019). The transition from school to post compulsory education can be challenging as this implies a move to a new educational setting, meeting new people, and managing new expectations. This can be a lot to manage alongside a heavy academic workload. For queer individuals who may have had a challenging experience at school it could mean a fresh start. However some of my participants highlighted some areas that they would like more specific support with, such as being able to change their deadname is public facing systems and communications, as well as pronouns. Aspects of continuous pastoral support and wellbeing checks can make a difference to student's sense of belonging.

- Support for teachers: this is a neglected dimension of the available models and theorisations of belonging. For example, Booker's (2021) qualitative research shows how pupils' belonging in school was correlated with teachers' caring behaviours. However, no articulation exists to care for the teachers themselves, and as a teacher educator I consider this an essential consideration to foster belonging. Caring for those who care is a matter of fairness, therefore professional learning and support for teachers can help us meet the conditions for students to thrive in their educational journey. Aspects of professional learning around minoritised individuals, alongside

> intersectionality, can inform pedagogically powerful responses from educators to enact inclusive practice.

In developing the framework for student belonging in post-compulsory education, I address research question two, related to how the experiences and perspectives of LGBTQ+ students could inform inclusive practice in post-compulsory education. The discussion presented in the next section follows the same nomenclature as the one presented above and is part of the reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019; 2021) used as the main interpretive method of my participants' epistemic contributions.

1. Personal dimensions of belonging: identity, personality, needs and motivations

Identity

We return now to the first two aspects of the personal and subjective dimension of belonging: identity and personality. Starting with aspects of identity, we have an inextricable relationship to what makes us unique combined with what we share with others. As McAdams et al. (2021) research into human personality explores, the role of the self and identity means that the self is a perspective whereas personality is a thing, which is influenced by self-processes that are integrated into our personality. Also, 'self-esteem follows a normative developmental trajectory' (p. 2), making our narratives incredibly important as the stories that we live by. This means that our life experiences influence the development of the self and our identity. When queer stories are shared, sometimes other queer individuals experience a MeToo moment which can be life affirming, while non-queer individuals may get valuable insights or new learning that can assist our social interactions. As Dylan articulates, our identity may be internal and personal but when shared with others we may start to make sense of how our personality has been influenced by narratives:

> I think we kind of forget that we're all just people built up of stories. And I think when you unravel those stories, just amazing things start to happen. And I think people start to listen to each other. And yeah, like you say, you don't realise until you do something like this, where you're like, that's a really normal experience. Oh, my god, everybody

> goes through that. And then actually a part of you sort of settles and it's really strange. [Dylan].

A salient aspect of all my participants' articulation of their queer identity, which resonates with my own, is the fact that we have all had a journey with the negotiation of those aspects of ourselves that are core to us versus those that have changed over the years. All my research participants' self-identified as being LGBTQ+, meaning that they were open about their queer identities from the outset, and many felt that this aligned well with my research intentions. Their epistemic contributions include the sharing of how they have come to terms with what being of a different gender/sexuality means. Regarding the narratives and life experiences that have shaped their queer ontology, there is contrast between their current understanding of themselves versus their younger years. This has influenced the various approaches and degrees of expression of our current identity, making core aspects of ourselves internal, while our personality and its unique traits have been gradually adjusted as we encounter opportunities to grow and change as part of our life journeys. This is significant for this thesis, because articulating this learning can help us address hermeneutical injustices (Fricker, 2007) related to epistemic gaps, related to gender/sexuality diversity—and what constitutes a core identity versus a behaviour susceptible to change.

My own experience as an introverted individual who used to be painfully shy has meant learning and applying communication techniques that make me successful in my role as educator, meaning that aspects of my personality are externalised in ways that help my professional persona. However, central to this thesis is the conviction that the articulation of a queer identity as part of nature and non-fungible deserves dignity and respect. The misunderstanding of being considered a lifestyle (Pew Research Centre, 2013) needs to be addressed as an epistemic injustice, in that many act based on what they perceive to be a choice rather than a core element that cannot and should not be attempted to be changed (Ban Conversion Therapy, 2024). My example of the relationship between my identity and my personality is that being gay has not and cannot be changed, whereas my being shy and introverted can be managed through learning ways to be sociable.

For Dylan, maintaining one's core identity is important, though the need to adapt to context becomes more of a necessity around others who may not have the interpretive tools to understand queerness:

> In a way, I don't know, in an ideal world, you shouldn't have to adapt. You should just be able to sort of be yourself freely and stuff. But then again, I don't know, a part of me is like, well, you adapt all the time, but most people will adapt to, [for example], they'll have a work person, and they'll have like a home person. And that's usually as far as it kind of goes for most people. Whereas when you're queer, it's kind of like, all right, I've got my work self, but there's also, like, I don't know, the work self that I need to adapt to be around certain people. Like this one person from marketing, or that person from HR who I can totally be myself around, do you know what I mean? And then as well, at home, there's kind of like the, okay, so maybe it's okay to be yourself around, like, say, your dad, and that's fine. But older aunt Edith, if I tell her that I'm queer, she's going to have a heart attack type of thing. And it's an exhausting process as well, of constantly having to be hyper aware. [Dylan].

Similarly, Matty offered a perspective on what he wishes people understood about his identity and expression:

> I think that what needs to change, though, is the fact of feeling like if you are different in the eyes of other people, that you shouldn't have to prove yourself. That it shouldn't be like one rule for one, another rule for another sort of situation. Because I had that experience growing up, being trans myself, feeling like I need to prove to people that I'm a man by acting very overtly masculine and denying all feminine traits, which was really bad for my mental health because I'm someone who is quite fluid in gender expression. It was annoying having to feel like I can't prove a point because of the way that the community around us was at the time, of like, if you present any sort of feminine traits, then you're not really a man. But again, that is something that [when] you change your environment, you then realise that not everybody's going to expect that out of you. And if you just surround yourself with people that aren't going to treat you in that way of like, you have to prove yourself to us first, then it definitely does make a better impact on your mental health. [Matty].

On the above, May as a bisexual woman also offered a similar perspective

> They think that girls are just the ones who are bisexual, and boys that are bisexual are actually gay. And that's the niche thing. They say that we're greedy. They say that's phase. They say that you'll just end up with a guy confused. Yeah, confused. And then you kind of have this internalised misogyny because I have a boyfriend now, but I think I should be with him to validate my sexuality. It's weird, I feel like I should be with a girl, or I should have been with a girl for longer, even though that's not the case and I know that. But sometimes you have that little thought of, I need to prove myself [May].

A distinct characteristic of a queer identity is the need to engage in an in-depth introspection to make sense of the uniqueness of our experiences. By contrast, many heterosexual counterparts perhaps do not need to interrogate in the same way their gender/sexuality. This highlights taken for granted privileges, and the normative in heteronormativity, in that it is assumed to be the standard, default, and therefore only natural way to exist. This is why for many queer individuals coming out becomes a multipurpose exercise, ranging from self-identification, self-acceptance and wanting authentic relationships, to political acts of defiance against discrimination and prejudice (Anderson et al., 2021; Brown, 2017; Pew Research Centre, 2013). For example, Dom's journey of self-discovery and self-acceptance meant negotiating their authentic self with how to exteriorise it, resulting in a positive learning experience:

> My first few years in university were quite limited. I was very shy, I was very withdrawn, I wasn't sort of as outgoing as I am now. And I think a lot of that can be attributed to the fact that I didn't feel comfortable in myself, I didn't feel comfortable with the label I'd assigned myself or that other people had assigned to me, and I didn't quite feel like who I was portraying was right. So, I think once I finally sort of sat with that feeling of discomfort, sort of really mulled over who am I, who do I want to be, who do I want other people to think I am, it allowed me to sort of expand and sort of realise that actually my identity is a massive part of who I am and who I want to be and what I want to do. So, yeah, I think it's had a positive impact on my educational experience. [Dom].

To this, I offered my own strategy when meeting new people, which makes me sometimes anxious, especially if I feel it may not be safe for me to share that I am gay:

> There is a kind of chameleon effect with a lot of queer people, in that in order to belong or feel safe they have to chameleonize. My experience has been of having to adapt, change bits of myself, conform a little bit to that new environment, and a lot of the time is for safety reasons. So, some people might be I don't know, say, naturally flamboyant, or very free, and so on with their very close friends. But when they go to a different environment where they may not feel safe, they kind of almost have to change their expression, the way they talk, the way they walk, the way they dress, all of that. Basically, they may feel that they belong and feel at ease within certain contexts but may not feel the same in other contexts. So, I think the idea of belonging is contingent, but I think I'm exploring it from the point of view of what could we do in education? So, people feel that you can be yourself without feeling that you have to compromise too much of who you are? [Leo].

Personality

When reflecting about learning environments, Matty eloquently articulated the relationship between a queer identity as something ‘out of your control’ and its implications for acceptance during social interactions:

> It's just being able to feel like you can go into a space and not being immediately assessed based on things that are out of your control. You'll be surrounded by people who are going to make judgments based on personality and the way that you treat other people, but it should not be about the way that you were born. I think that's just the basic gist of belonging, to be fair, just being able to be in that environment and not feel judged for things that are out your control. [Matty].

We also have Amanda’s example of negotiation between a queer identity and what is shared socially, especially in educational settings (Gray, 2013; Ratcliffe, 2020). Her reserved personality regarding her sexual orientation means that she is comfortable with her sexuality but does not believe in labels and does not share it often. When asked about whether being LGBTQ+ made any difference to her educational experience, she replied:

> For me, personally, no, I don't think it's made a difference whatsoever when it comes to kind of things like this and kind of identifying as whatever. I'm not the kind of person who would scream from the rafters and go, I'm gay, I'm a lesbian, or whatever. [Amanda].

Blight shared how his trans identity made his school years challenging, meaning that his anxiety when completing higher education made him alert to how this might be received by his classmates. This is an example of the type of existential worry that many queer individuals experience by virtue of their lived experiences—meaning that they might constantly feel ‘on the line of fire’ (Orne, 2013) and develop an anxious personality:

> My initial worry when I first was in the class was, oh, god, there's a few lads in here who are very hyper masculine. And I was very worried about them treating me differently because I was trans male. But they made me feel so included because they were curious to know, and open. They would come and say, oh, hi mate and stuff like that. And I felt really included. Then we'd go to the pub together and I didn't feel any different. [Blight].

Dylan also experiences anxiety, based on his identity as a non-binary individual. Their account of exclusion from school explored in the previous section sets the scene for the type of lived experience that has long lasting effects, meaning that his identity and expression are constantly being negotiated:

> There is something that I've always been aware of, it's an anxiety I carry with me, especially with a lot of the stuff that's going on at the moment. People always find this really weird because I'm quite feminine presenting, but I see myself as more of a man. Not necessarily a full man, but more of a man. So, my ideal is to kind of be quite masculine in dress with a really feminine face and stuff. But now I'm a bit like, let's just keep to sort of femme presenting for the majority of the time. It's just safer, it's just easier.
>
> I didn't realise until I was doing my own kind of research and stuff, despite the majority of my friends being queer, that you're kind of preempting trouble, and homophobic bullying. I've had small instances [of this] in workplaces and things like that. Also, in education a sense of transphobia and things like that. But I've not experienced anything like that since I left school at 14. [Dylan].

Similarly, Ted shared an experience where his queer identity made him extra alert to social interactions where he felt he was being treated differently at his children's school—which he articulated as 'it might have just been my oversensitive little self about it all' [Ted]. I offered my own interpretation of his account, against some of the theories I was exploring at the time (Morantes-Africano, 2023; Orne, 2013):

> Some of the literature available also suggests that our socialisation, upbringing, and accumulation of experiences influences our responses, and for many LGBTQ+ individuals it means being kind of, I don't know, being alert, extra alert. I think it's a lot to do with what we were talking about earlier in terms of growing up, and if all of that is constantly reinforced on you, that this [being queer] is not right; that wrongness, you kind of are extra alert about. So, I think you absolutely have a valid concern in terms of how others interact with you, perceive you and so on, but also with your own children. And you see this is in a way why my work is about the future of education, future teacher education specifically, because I think teachers have power. Based on my experience, my secondary school [experience] was awful, truly dreadful. I was bullied and my teachers were not supportive, but my teachers in uni were incredible and literally transformed me by affirming my identity and helping me overcome some of the conflict I had with my own identity. [Leo].

However, Hunter offers a positive outlook on the importance of the type of learning central to my work regarding epistemic injustices (Fricker, 2007). As new knowledge and new language is available, we can start articulating our experience and name or express how we feel internally:

> It's kind of ironic that I identify as nonbinary. Back when I was 14-15, I thought, what the hell is that? That's loads of rubbish. Like, you're either one or the other. There's no such thing as all these other genders. And then you actually educate yourself. And then I actually started to identify because my family at the time, they are very narrow minded, so I was kind of influenced by that. [Hunter].

The above examples illustrate the inextricable connection between core aspects of ourselves, such as our gender identity and sexual orientation, and how our journeys and social interactions shape how and what we exteriorise of ourselves. In this way, considering aspects of our identity that cannot be changed as internal, and in many cases invisible to others, versus how we present ourselves, what personality traits, and what Allen et al. (2021) call competencies, could help us to interpret belonging much more richly. This, for inclusive education, offers useful starting points to affirm our students' identity and support their journey to be and become the best versions of themselves.

Needs

This section focuses on the interplay between belonging as a fundamental human need and our motivations to belong to groups of people, places, and fields of knowledge or practice. I start with an appraisal of Maslow's theory of motivation (1943, 1954), which includes belonging as a core human need, therefore it is highly relevant to my theorisation of belonging as a matter of social justice. I will then offer practical examples of how needs could be addressed in educational settings while incorporating some of my participants' contributions to illustrate this. The second aspect, related to motivations, draws on the synthesis provided by Cook and Artino (2016) of theories of motivations, also supported by Ryan and Deci's (2000) articulation of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. These two aspects intersect. As a fundamental human need, belonging means that we cannot survive isolated, we need one another (Brown, 2017).

About motivations, we have diverse types and levels of motivation, our drive and intentions vary, but as social beings we are innately drawn to connect and belong.

Basic human needs

I start by clarifying my position on the concept of needs, which does not align fully with Maslow's (1943, p. 3) theorisation of humans as perpetually wanting animals. According to Maslow, human needs 'arrange themselves in hierarchies of pre-potency. That is to say, the appearance of one need usually rests on the prior satisfaction of another, more pre-potent need' (p. 3). He also argued that these needs are intrinsically related to each other:

> This means that the most prepotent goal will monopolize consciousness and will tend of itself to organize the recruitment of the various capacities of the organism. The less prepotent needs are minimized, even forgotten, or denied. But when a need is fairly well satisfied, the next prepotent ('higher') need emerges, in turn to dominate the conscious life and to serve as the center of organization of behavior, since gratified needs are not active motivators (p. 18).

Instead of adopting this linear and oversimplified view of needs, I borrow from moral philosophy a more nuanced approach by considering what constitutes a need, and what compels us to act to address such need. This will help the connection between fundamental human needs and how we can address these in education, while illustrating specific considerations for LGBTQ+ individuals. For example, Brock and Miller (2024, para. 14) illustrate the relationship between a need as a fact versus a need as a prompt to act to fulfil it: 'If John, who has a migraine, needs a painkiller (matter of fact), then I have a reason to give him one (normative reason). So, needs serve as a bridge between "is" and "ought"'. Extending this example to queer individuals, their gender/sexual difference is a matter of *'is'* as this is part of their core identity. This fact, I argue, means that we *'ought'* to make belonging a matter of justice. For this reason, the below borrows and adapts the five broad categories of Maslow's theories of needs and motivations (1943, 1954) to illustrate how they intersect and bring nuances related to a queer ontology.

Maslow proposed that 'there are at least five sets of goals, which we may call basic needs. These are briefly physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization' (p. 18). Despite his theory of motivation being widely critiqued, his insights into human needs and motivations are valuable to this thesis. Examples of critiques and wide interpretations of his work include those still interpreting needs as 'deficiency versus growth' (Noltemeyer et al., 2020), or the use of the

'pyramid of needs'. On the latter, Eaton (2012, p. 7) clarifies that Maslow's theory of needs was never presented as a pyramid, meaning that this could be a 'mutation or an interpretation of the original work'. In addition to this, though, there are many scholarly critiques of his work. For example, Daniels' (1988) and Mittelman's (1991) argue that the theory of self-actualisation does not sufficiently consider context and culture. It is also important to highlight that we may reach self-actualisation every time we achieve a goal but for us as late modern life dwellers, the goalposts keep moving, meaning that self-actualisation is never a moment.

However, other theorists, while critiquing Maslow's work, agree that his contributions have value in the fields of psychology (Kenrick et al., 2010; Neher, 1991) and education (Feigenbaum, 2023). I agree with an approach that does not expect a theory to be all-encompassing when it comes to understanding the complexity of the human experience. Therefore, I take the five categories of 'basic needs' (Maslow, 1954, pp. 35-47) to illustrate how these can be related to the experiences related by my research participants, adapted and updated even from a gender inclusive perspective, acknowledging that Maslow wrote in the fashion of the times where androcentric knowledge and writing was the norm:

1. Physiological needs: basic human requirements for survival, including air, food, water, shelter, clothing, warmth, sex, and sleep.
2. Safety needs: includes personal security, health, financial security, and safety from harm.
3. Love and belongingness needs: This involves relationships, friendships, intimacy, and familial connections. Humans have a desire to belong and be accepted by others.
4. Esteem needs: include self-esteem, as well as respect and appreciation from others. It includes feelings of accomplishment, recognition, and the desire for prestige and status.
5. Self-actualisation: the realisation of one's goals, self-fulfilment, and personal growth. This level is about becoming, which is part of my theorisation of belonging as a process of being and becoming.

Considering the above description of each category of needs, I now intersect these general theoretical insights with practical examples of how these relate to educational settings and students, while using some of my participants' contributions to illustrate unique aspects of diversity within student populations.

Physiological needs

The first set of needs imply physiological requirements, to be understood as the basic requirements for human survival, and biological ones which enable our health and well-being. I argue that educators must be aware of these and address them as part of their planning and

classroom management. Here, aspects of accessibility to classrooms and other learning spaces are important, especially for students with reduced mobility; ensuring that spaces have adequate temperature and good lighting; visible text and/or images during presentations; and allowing comfort breaks to have a rest, food, a drink, or use the toilet. These are basic but important reminders that our bodies mediate learning. On the issue of gendered toilets, Hunter offered an insight that is relevant to my theorisation of belonging that considers not only the impact of gendered identities (Holmes, 2019), but of gendered spaces too:

> When I was 21, I came out as nonbinary… There was only one inclusive toilet in the college building I used to be in, and a lot of the times I found that it was mostly staff using it, even though there were staff toilets right next to it. And I found that really weird. And obviously, I'm not one to judge what their gender identity is, but they themselves have private toilets for themselves. And it was quite frustrating because there was times I had to go to the girls' bathrooms, and that's just a bit uncomfortable for me because it's like, yeah, I still look female, but I feel a bit invasive going in there. [Hunter].

As discussed before, binary, and trans individuals exist in liminal spaces, with inclusive toilets being a neutral and non-gendered space that offers a level of safety. Hunter's remark of finding weird that teachers used inclusive toilets may not acknowledge that inclusive means all, not only people with protected characteristics. The issue of enacting inclusion is complex and requires considering not only our needs but other people's too.

Safety needs

Given that a considerable proportion of queer individuals fear for their safety (GLAAD, 2024; Jones, 2020; Stonewall, 2017; 2018; 2022; 2023b) this must be considered a pre-condition for belonging. As Dylan stated during the interview, educational settings ought to be safe spaces for all students:

> It's about keeping kids safe and it's about kind of knowing that they need to know that there's a space somewhere. Doesn't matter where that space is, as long as it's safe. I think I just got really lucky personally, after kind of having all those kind of years of stuff and then kind of battling with mental health and stuff while I was in education, I was just very fortunate that my [college] tutors weren't queer, but they were just very supportive, fortunately. [Dylan].

For Dom, aspects of core identity such as being queer and/or autistic mean that to belong sometimes we must consider our safety first. This negotiates a need to adapt around others while keeping in mind our right to exist as our true selves:

> Because I'm autistic, I've struggled with that sense of belonging in social groups for a long time. So, sort of thinking of it as sort of a greater purpose and a greater sort of aim, so to speak, has helped me feel like I belong a little bit more when I'm in scenarios where I typically wouldn't feel like I did. So yeah, for me, I don't personally think that altering your personality to ensure your safety or to progress in your career or whatever, is necessarily not belonging. [Dom].

I would argue that for queer individuals safety is a precondition of belonging. Sensing hostility related to diverse gender/sexuality may inhibit the development of a sense of belonging in educational spaces where they have the right to exist. In addition to the moral stance offered in this thesis, May added two perspectives worth highlighting about students' accruing debt to pay for an educational experience that could be challenging in the lights of peers' behaviours, but also how talking more about queer issues could be pedagogically powerful:

> My thought would be to definitely challenge any behaviour if it's homophobic transphobic, definitely challenge it immediately and then follow with repercussions, because I really don't think it's fair that someone who pays for education has to be subjected to that kind of treatment and then say it's fine. It's not, you know what I mean? So, I think, definitely challenge behaviours like that. And then I think as a second recommendation for education would be to just talk about it. Just talking about it, really, and discussing it more. Obviously, if they're comfortable with it, and just being a lot more open about it. Because, again, I think there's not a lot of education on it, I don't think there's a lot of understanding around it. So, I think bringing that into light is really good. [May].

Love and belonging

Here we have another example of interrelationality. Love implies giving and receiving affection and care for the self and others. Belonging is about being in a place where you want to be, and where others want you there too. Both share a deep, fulfilling connection between people.

Mark describes a sense of comfort in meeting people sharing the same academic and professional interests as you. This is a unique characteristic of post compulsory education, in that our experiences shape our decisions, motivations and dreams. We start defining where we want to belong and be associated with:

> Going into an A level I did psychology and sociology, in which you tend to meet likeminded people in the same subjects that you take. And it makes you feel a lot more comfortable in that way, being able to meet new people at a more mature age, where you're all just kind of trying to find your own identities. [Mark].

Dom's articulation of belonging reflects a sense of purpose, rooted in a sense of knowing who we are:

> I think for me, it's a personal feeling. It is a feeling of knowing who I am and where I fit in the greater world and feeling like I have a purpose and that I'm able to achieve that purpose. So, that sense of belonging can extend not just to where I work or where I live or who I'm with. It's more of a greater feeling than it is sort of small scale limited to what I'm doing in that moment of time. Whereas I think for a lot of people, when they think of belonging, they feel like, do I belong here? Am I the right fit for this office or am I the right fit for this course? For me, it's more about my personal journey and what I want to achieve. [Dom].

The above contrasts with what May, as a bisexual woman, experienced in school regarding having a dedicated group to meet other queer people; yet she did not feel like she belonged even there:

> Secondary school was quite inclusive. There was a teacher who had like LGBTQ classes and stuff and had groups together. I think it was quite a bit awkward, I'm not going to lie, it did feel a bit awkward. I don't think there was a lot in regards to education. It was more just the kids that identify as LGBTQ, just sort of hang around rather than and it was nice to have that sort of group, but it was still quite I don't know how to put it, I still didn't feel like I belonged. And it was quite confusing then. And yeah, that's probably my take. [May].

During the interview I offered May my interpretation of why she may not have felt drawn to be part of the school LGBTQ club:

> When 90 odd percent of the population identify as heterosexual, then LGBTQ become the others. But then those others become an umbrella that perhaps are not necessarily a community. [Leo].

May's example made me reflect on the need for education to legally comply but also to promote equality and diversity, which in turn prompts us to create spaces for those normally marginalised to belong to. However, in the case of being a minority, what we may have in common is the experience of discrimination rather than shared humanity. I would not suggest that such spaces should not exist. They are important and offer an opportunity for the sharing of experiences. My questioning is related to how inclusive these would be for non-queer individuals. In a way we could argue that they are robbed of the experience of learning about and from diversity. In the case offered by May, not feeling that she belonged in that setting illustrates how having opportunities to access spaces does not by itself guarantee that students will feel that they can or want to belong.

Esteem needs

As above, esteem requires an interplay between the self and those around us where we feel valued, appreciated and seen. A queer individual may be self-assured about their self-esteem, however when those around us constantly reject our queerness it can have a negative impact on our mental health. Aspects of anxiety that result from constant bullying and harassment are salient here. For example, Marty and Dylan experienced bullying to the point where they had to be physically excluded from the group at school and put in an alternative timetable, seemingly for safety reasons. This had an impact on how they perceived their place and value in social practice. However, post-compulsory education offered new beginnings:

> It was so much different coming into a college setting where, I don't know, I was so reluctant to kind of engage with anybody when I got there because I was so used to what I experienced in high school. But the people there were just so welcoming and friendly towards us that I was like, hang on, what's going on here? It really caught me off guards to begin with. [Matty].

Matty's ontology up to the point of joining college meant that he encountered acceptance, respect, and value from peers as a new and unexpected experience. Others' appraisal of our

identity highly influences our sense of place and value in the world, thus impacting our self-esteem.

Self-actualisation

We could interpret the realisation of our potential as a never-ending journey. In this way the self-actualises in various degrees, in many ways, and perhaps many times during our lifetimes. Leaving school and starting to shape the paths we want to take forward is part of the being and becoming relationship that anchors my framework of belonging. This means that there is no fixity in either our identities nor our career and life choices. For example, if a young person is into drawing and joins a programme of study, they might find people who are into the same things as them. An interesting aspect of belonging today, in the sense of our professional formation and academic or personal interests, is the 'ecology' of social media (Eaton, 2019) and online networks to connect, share and learn, even if people are in other parts of the world. An example of how post-compulsory education can be a place where such being and becoming can be part of the same process was given by Matty:

> I joined the animation level three course. But the thing is, that is such a diverse course in itself, because you're going to do that with a lot of [other] art subjects, I've come to realise, it's like people use art as an expression. I did that. So, the people that are going to be coming onto art courses are generally going to be some of the most open and accepting people because they know what it's like to express themselves through art and how cathartic that can be for someone who deems themselves as different. In that course, everyone got along really well, and it was a nice environment to have. It didn't feel hostile. It didn't feel like everyone had their own little groups or anything like that. Everyone was just super supportive of each other from day one. So, I guess you could say that obviously while secondary school was like a negative impact in terms of me being a minority in education, being able to move into a college setting where people either have experienced it before so they understand or they just respect, it was such a nice difference to have. [Matty].

Acknowledging human needs as fundamental conditions for existence and wellbeing places them in the category of essential professional learning for educators. As a dimension of belonging, students needs ought to be identified and addressed. For example, acknowledging that bodies mediate learning should be considered when planning lessons and managing learning in the classroom.

Motivations

Whereas fundamental human needs are core conditions of survival, our motivations are subjective, contingent, and diverse. This section explores two main theories of motivations. The first is Cook and Artino's synthesis of theories of motivation (2016, p. 999) which offers useful perspectives to articulate how having a clear identity, a personality that flows in social scenarios and a fundamental need to belong somewhere, are not enough if we do not want to belong. This reminds us that belonging is a selective process, as not all of us want to belong everywhere, or be associated with practices or people too far removed from who we are:

- Expectancy value: motivation is a function of the expectation of success and perceived value.
- Attribution: after an event, learners create subconscious causal explanations (attributions) for the results. Attributions vary in terms of locus, stability, and controllability. These influence emotions, which in turn drive motivations in future tasks.
- Social-cognitive: human learning and performance result from reciprocal interactions among personal, behavioural, and environmental factors. Self-efficacy beliefs are the primary drivers of motivated actions.
- Goal orientation: learners tend to engage in tasks with concerns about mastering content (mastery goal), doing better than others (performance-approach goal). Mastery goals appear to stimulate interest and deep learning, whereas performance-approach goals are associated with better grades.
- Self-determination: intrinsic motivation leads people to act purely to satisfy their curiosity or desire for mastery. All other actions are prompted by extrinsic motivation, which is driven by social values. Extrinsically motivated actions can become self-determined as values become integrated and internalised. Intrinsic and internalised motivations are promoted by feelings of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Autonomy refers to the opportunity to control one's actions. Competence refers to the perceived ability to master and achieve. Relatedness refers to a sense of affiliation with or belonging to others to whom they would like to feel connected.

The second theory of motivation is that of Ryan and Deci (2000), aligned to humanistic theories of needs and motivations, such as Andragogy (Knowles, 1984, in Finlay, 2010). According to Ryan and Deci (2000, p. 54), motivation is not a unitary phenomenon; we have not only different amounts of motivation but also distinct types. The former relates to how much motivation we have, and the latter to the orientation of that motivation. Their categorisation of human motivations into intrinsic and extrinsic relates to the self-determination category discussed by Cook and Artino (2016).

In terms of belonging, we can see how prospective students may want to join a field of knowledge or practice based on their inner drive, talents, and interests, akin to the relatedness described above by Cook and Artino (2016). In my theorisation of belonging, I consider this to be significant, as a high drive to become a better person, academic or professional, could push us to adapt aspects of our personality and behaviours to achieve this goal. Aspects of self-efficacy (Cook & Artino, 2016) would be salient here, which for queer individuals could mean staying in education despite challenges but perhaps not feeling that they fully belong.

Regarding Ryan and Deci's (2000) intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, when students' love and passion for specific subjects drives them to achieve mastery goals (Cook & Artino, 2016), there are external influences that intersect here, as subjects are likely to join post-compulsory education because they also need certain grades, certificates, work placements or qualifications to continue their journey (performance-approach goals), which are part of the extrinsic motivations related to belonging. This means learning with and/or from people sharing our same interests (intrinsic motivation). But as relational beings we need each other, and aspects of connection with people who are into the same things as us makes belonging a natural process, whereas for some, even if they struggle with those around them, there is value in learning together. In this way, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations coexist in our love for what we do but also for some through networks and communities of learning or practice (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015) in a more practical or transactional way.

This type of reward-driven motivation is contrasted to those motivations that stem from avoiding pain or discomfort, such as the accounts of my participants who found that migrating from spaces where they did not feel accepted and respected meant that post-compulsory education gave them a renewed sense of self. An example of social cognitive motivation (Artino & Cook, 2016) was given by Mark, who found that changing educational setting gave him motivation to express himself and develop aspects of his identity that he could not before when he was in school:

> I think your environment heavily influences how comfortable you are in expressing yourself. And I find that if you feel as if you're not happy where you are like, you can't have an aspect that's so natural, and you feel like you can't put on or say, so what? Because you have that fear of judgement and such, then it's important to consider how can I change this environment around me? Because I know not everyone has the

> opportunity or the possibility to have that environment change, but it's finding a way to restore your own boundaries. Because I know that's definitely what I felt and what I've discussed today, like moving from high school to Sixth Form, it was a massive change in environment that gave me a massive change in who I am today. [Mark].

Dom articulates an ethos that drives their intention to work in education and support youth through inclusive practice. Their passion is an example of intrinsic motivation, which shows a clear sense of belonging to education as a field of practice. On the other hand, there is an aspect of negotiation regarding their professional versus personal identities, akin what Jones (2020) and Busch et al. (2022) analyse about the ways in which queer individuals navigate their queer selves in professional settings. These are examples of extrinsic motivation, in that professionalism comes with external expectations that we must adhere to as part of peer appraisals of our behaviours:

> When I think about sort of what my aim is and what my goal is sort of as a person, my goal is to always try to be inclusive, because I'm very aware that inclusion is an impossible task as much as we try. There's things that happen that mean we don't include everybody all of the time, but I try where possible, to be a safe space for people, to be very open about my own struggles without alienating people who have had worse struggles and without people feeling like I'm unstable. Because I think there's a lot of stigma that comes with being in a professional position, but still trying to be personable, is that people can often see you as unprofessional or unstable when actually it's invaluable to students, and to other staff members. To be able to see somebody who has done it and been there and struggled with the same things you've struggled with. And I think a lot of time we're too hung up on pride of saying I need to maintain this air of professionalism and I need to, like you say, hit all those legal boxes. Actually, I think we forget that there's human beings at the heart of it. [Dom].

This made me reflect on my journey of negotiating my own identity with my professional persona. I used to be wary of coming out to students, but my research has given me confidence to embrace my authentic self: I am a queer researcher and teacher educator. From a belonging perspective this means having the courage to share our most authentic selves with people. As Brown (2017, p. 161) asserts, 'our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance'. Adopting authenticity as an ethos and exploring the meaning and practice of belonging in education has created a sense of purpose to what I do, bound to who I am and why I do it (Morantes-Africano, 2024). Dom and I further reflected on our motivations to work in

education, and to affirm queer identities as valid, valuable, and worthy of dignity, respect, and equitable outcomes:

> Even if a young person is exploring their sexual identity or their gender identity, five years down the line, they might turn around and say, actually no, that's not who I am. That's fine. We talk about the queer agenda and a lot of queer people joke about the queer agenda now. But the queer agenda is not to turn all the children gay. The queer agenda is just bare minimum. All we want is for young gay people to actually grow up. And I think that comes back to sort of how violent it is at the moment, is that a lot of young queer people or transgender people are not making it into their adulthood which is so sad. So, all we want is for them to feel like they have some way to exist freely. [Dom].

I replied to this with my reflection on experiences and outcomes. At the time of the interview, I was drafting the onto-epistemology section of this thesis and had fresh in my mind that a queer ontology is not in itself different but sociocultural and historical influences make it so. I had also been reading the statistics of mental health issues that stem from bullying, harassment, and rejection from family, peers and teachers in school, and the general public. What we must keep advancing is not only access to opportunities and equal rights, but equity, as the outcomes of many queer individuals are not positive:

> Yes, this is about experiences and outcomes. That the outcome of a queer person is not negative. That's my dream too. We will struggle and that struggle is part of who we are. Probably understanding ourselves will be part of that wrestling. And I think that this extra wrestling is necessary because being too different is not easy. It's easy when you have a very clear identity and a very clear path. And that's fine. Lovely that you found that from a very early age. Like being artistic. Some people are born with that, and they just strive to be better, and they just find a way of channelling that. And that's lovely because it's just who you are from a very early age. It's a very clear thing. See what I mean? It's a little bit like that with gender. Some people have it very clear from a very early age and that's lovely, but not everybody has that experience, and this is part of the wrestling that comes with being queer. This is why I tell my students that learning topics and subjects is good, but the most useful learning that you can have from any teaching is that about ourselves. [Leo].

Dylan also exhibits an ethos regarding the learning that could come from educators being aware of their power to be part of their students' story and history. This means a clear desire and purpose to be an integral part of educational practice from out of their situatedness:

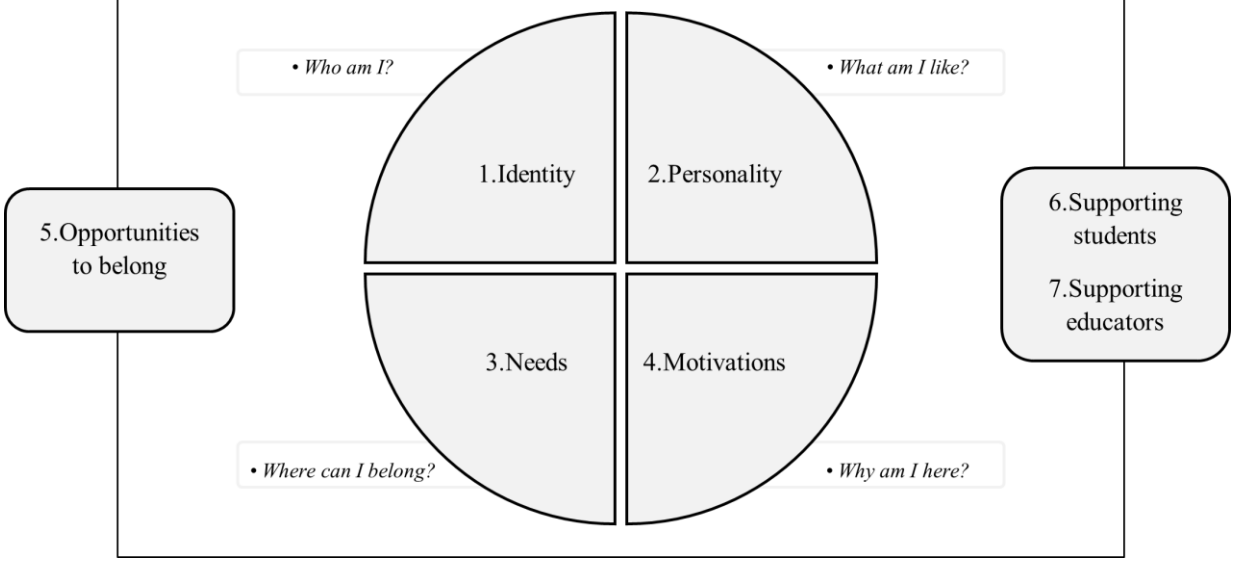
> I think generally I'm very passionate about any sort of queerness. I'm very passionate about queer joy and I didn't sort of realise until after I came out as nonbinary how my queerness is not everything, but my queerness is so important to me and kind of the ability to be in queer spaces and things like that… And I also think I'm very passionate about education and the weight that teachers hold, more than anybody. But I think any role that you hold in education, you're a part of somebody's story, and that's massive, and it's so beautiful. And you can be like happy you're not their whole story, but you can be a really happy, helpful side character, or you can be a villain. And it can go like that one of two ways. And I just think that sort of sharing experiences and stuff anyway, something that I'm very interested in in my artwork, is sort of a real life narrative surrounding things like queerness, things like addiction, mental health, things that are sort of we don't call them taboo, but they are. [Dylan].

From the above, the main points for educators to consider are that human motivations are complex and intersect inner drive, passions, and love for subjects or practices, as well as external expectations, targets and structural opportunities and barriers that play into a complex sense of belonging in education. A main concern regarding queer individuals would be they may have an inner desire to learn as part of a community but if they do not feel accepted, respected, valued, and supported to do so, their learning experience could be less than adequate. The commitment of educators to helping groups of individuals to find common ground through icebreakers or group tasks could be pedagogically powerful.

2. The institutional dimensions of belonging: opportunities to belong, supporting students, and supporting educators

After exploring the subjective characteristics of belonging by intersecting aspects of our identity, personality, needs and motivations, we now turn to the external, structural ways in which education can enable student belonging in education. This comprises three main components: 1) opportunities, 2) student support, and 3) teacher support, which will be discussed in this order below.

Fig 1. Framework of the personal and institutional dimensions of belonging in education



Opportunities to belong

This section returns to my critique of the notion of equal opportunities, in that access to education without support places the onus on the individual to succeed without considering external contingencies. This is particularly problematic for queer individuals who may come from a secondary schooling environment where they experienced bullying, rejection, constraints related to their gender expression, and little affirmation of their queer identities. Considering that a sense of belonging develops when we feel accepted, respected, supported, and valued, the journey starts when we are admitted onto a programme of study. As Mark and I reflected during the interview on his transition from school to a sixth form college:

> If you think about it from a legal point of view, you have the right to be here but that doesn't mean that you're going to be seen, accepted, heard, valued, be part of a group and so on. Not being isolated or not being singled out, all of that. So, I think this is why I am invested in this research, and I'm trying to understand belonging more. What do you understand by belonging, by the way? Have you experienced belonging? [Leo].

Mark responded by highlighted aspects of finding common ground with peers as important to foster a sense of belonging:

> Belonging is just more [about] your peers around you. To feel like you can really connect with them and feel appreciated by them. As well as on the topic of LGBTQ,

> that's right, to feel as if you can almost relate to them. So, for instance, I had a lot of queer friends in sixth form. And it wasn't something that we always, like, discussed about, but we just knew that, like, we could relate to each other's experiences, we would speak about high school experiences because it sounded like none of us had a good high school experience. But because of that, you feel like you belong together. You've almost came together from your life experiences together in this group where you can now find this newfound, like, appreciation [Mark].

For Matty, the opportunity to change the learning environment was significant for his safety and wellbeing. Reflecting on his experience at school, he felt that his teachers 'generally seem to have no care or respect for the students' [Matty]. Not feeling appreciated enough to get support about the threats he was receiving from classmates for being trans contrasted sharply with the ethos he experienced at college:

> [After starting the course in animation and illustration at the college] I just realised, oh, no, [school] was just a really bad environment. Like, not everything is like this. At college, they don't have a tolerance for that stuff. They try to remove those people from the environment relatively quickly, or they'll talk to them. [Matty].

My participants' accounts of experiences and perspectives are awe inspiring, and I am appreciative of their bravery while feeling privileged in their openness with me. As some of them already work in education, I reflected with Dom about the power of embracing vulnerability (Brown, 2013), and with Hunter about how the representation of minorities within teaching staff were important for connection and relatability (Ratcliffe, 2020).:

> I think that the idea of vulnerability is very difficult to embrace for some, but actually is what makes you human. And if anything, I think students respect you even more if you are in that position, especially if you accept your vulnerabilities, your flaws, your fears, your own journeys, your own struggles, and all of that as part of being a teacher but also being human. I think there is an element of relatability. They might feel like I'm also going through a lot of these myself, maybe one day I will see them through. Do you see what I mean? Rather than seeing that person as the epitome of everything I want to be, I think it's quite reassuring to know that we all experience challenges in life [Leo].

Dom's journey resonated with this:

> I just look at my own journey and I think people would look at me now, students in particular, would look at me now and think, I have got it figured out, I've probably never struggled a day in my life. They just see this confident person who's advocating for queer people, training staff members on how to be inclusive and they would never

> guess that three years ago I was selectively mute. So, without sharing that, how do students see that I've been there and done that? Because what you portray in the moment is what students assume you are all of the time. So, I think, like you say, that vulnerability is massively important for making students feel like they belong and making them feel like, actually, it might be tough now, but it'll not be tough forever. [Dom].

Hunter, as an autistic individual, also reflected on representation as important for student support through a knowing-as-being perspective. This is her account of a realisation that she had when working as a teaching assistant in a special needs school. Stim is to be read as the abbreviation of stimming, a self-stimulating behaviour commonly used by an autistic person to regulate their sensory input (Russell, 2023):

> This kid asked me, he was like, Miss, why do you have stim toys? And I turned to him, and I went, oh, I'm autistic. It helps me self-regulate. And he lit up and he was like, you're like me? And I was like, yeah, that's beautiful. And it made me then go, oh, hang on a second, all the people teaching, like, neurodivergent kids are not neurodivergent [themselves]. Then I noticed, and staff noticed, like, all these kids wanted to talk to me more because I could relate. I knew how they kind of clicked. [Hunter].

A salient aspect that many of my participants highlighted as positive regarding their college experience, both in further and higher education, was not only experiencing diversity, but also being able to connect with others as part of their educational journey. In this way, I would argue that post-compulsory education offers opportunities to be and become. For example, May and Matty, who are graduates from MyCampus, reflected on their experience during their postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE) qualification:

> I think that something I found quite refreshing when doing the PGCE was that there were so many diverse people with diverse sexualities and identities. It added a richness to the course as well, because before then I was with what was like a mixture of people, but it was mostly like white men and women and most of them were straight. But this is like it's been very diverse, so it's added a lot to the course. So, I think identity and belonging are important because then more things like that will come forward if that makes sense [May].

I agreed with May's point that diversity, as normalising gender/sexual diversity, helps us find shared humanity, which is also an essential component of working in education. My reflection on linking the theory with the reality of belonging via my own students was this:

> During the last course I taught I witnessed what belonging could be like for some queer individuals. I genuinely witnessed it in front of me. Those reservations and those anxieties I had about having two trans students in my class changed. I genuinely was worried at the beginning because this is not typical. Having a trans person in a room already makes me extra vigilant because I worry: are people going to respect you, accept you, are they going to make fun of you, are they going to call you the dead name? I mean, all sorts of things that could happen. So, I'm always mega on guard about that. [Leo].

However, as Matty reflected on his experience during his PGCE, connecting with others made him experience acceptance, respect, and safety, which resonates with Selassie's (2022) notion of how belonging develops when we integrate interconnectedness into daily life:

> Whenever we can all get together on a night out or something, we are just look like a box of crayola. Like just the most varied group of people out there because everybody's so different, but we all get along so well. Which, again, I guess is another different experience that I've been having since moving past college as well. Because obviously, being in an animation setting, you're around people that are relatively similar, and all come from similar life experiences. But ever since I've started taking on things outside such as dance classes and obviously doing the PGCE, I'm hanging around with such a variety group of people, but they're all still so respectful, which was something that it was kind of another background fear that I had before talking to anyone outside of that sort of animation circle. Because I was just so used to like, this is the safe haven. This is where I'm not going to be judged. But honestly, I'm in just such a space now where I feel like I could just talk with anyone, vibe with anyone, and it's fine. And I'm so glad that I'm in this space now where I do feel comfortable enough to do that. [Matty].

Perhaps removing some of the restrictions that schools have on gender expression is a significant part of the opportunities to belong that my framework proposes. For example, Mark reflected on gender expression:

> Going from the high school where I had short hair and I wore, like, this all-grey uniform, to a place where I remember walking in there with people with piercings, just like, awesome hair, like, cool hair dyes, cool clothing. I was like, wow, you really can just be yourself here. That's really inspiring, that's really good. [Mark].

Dom also reflected on the opportunity for young people to be and express themselves when they transition from school to college:

> It's almost that contrast between sort of post compulsory, like you say, is you choose to do that, you put yourself in that scenario. Whereas with compulsory education, particularly secondary school, it's a legal requirement, you have to go there. It's very much built around making you ready for work and conforming and that idea of you have your uniform, everybody looks the same, everyone behaves the same, whereas post compulsory almost has that flexibility of actually everybody is good at different things and your personality and your skills are what will make you shine. So, it almost fosters that creative aspect of people's personalities and allows them to sort of explore identities. And I think that then perpetuates itself by if you see 20 students who are exploring their identity or exploring how they express their gender and things like that, you feel more comfortable to do that. And I think that's what's really nice about this particular institution is that it does foster that welcoming atmosphere of going, actually, we don't care what you look like. We don't care how you behave. As long as you turn up and you put the effort into what you want to do, do it. [Dom].

Supporting students

I start this section by aligning my positionality on student support with that of Thomas (2012), who considers that it is ethical and socially responsible to argue that, when we admit a student, we acknowledge that they had the potential to succeed. Therefore, there is an institutional obligation to take reasonable steps to enable this success; otherwise, as Engstrom and Tinto (2008) argue, access without support is not opportunity. Two perspectives are salient regarding desirable futures for queer students in post compulsory education: 1) to foster a compassionate approach to learning in a safe and 'brave' space, and 2) practical institutional support for trans and nonbinary students regarding their public facing names and pronouns.

Education as a safe and a brave space

Hunter articulated a compassionate and educational approach to epistemic gaps, where queer individuals experience rejection or bullying based on their peers' limited understanding of natural diversity, or the replication of sociocultural norms. The classroom needs to be both a safe and a brave space (Arao & Clemens, 2013) to learn. This means that instead of making others feel inadequate for not understanding the impact of received heteronormativity, many queer individuals would rather try to educate others. This educational approach has been reported in research carried out by Ferfolja and Robinson (2004), Orne (2013) and Seal (2019):

> I wish teachers do more safeguarding. If you even overhear the tiniest comment, address it, don't brush it off, [but] don't go straight to the parents. Because they need someone to educate them that what they're saying is wrong. They might not even be aware of what they're saying. Is bad and it could just be an innocent remark to them. A little comment does not always come from a bad place. But if you can get them in a way that's not shouting at them, not telling them off, not make them feel like what they've done is wrong. Don't embarrass them either. Just to simply just be like, oh, you can't say that. And if they're like, why can't I say that? Then you start, then bring it in casually conversation. I found that being embarrassed by teachers as well is such a thing that has affected me to this day because I hate being embarrassed. Being embarrassed is such a massive fear of mine because teachers embarrassed me so much. [Hunter].

Blight adds an additional, compassionate approach that avoids enacting anti-bullying or disciplinary policies, perhaps from their own experience at school. The main message is to explore *with* students the root causes of their behaviour as an educational and self-awareness approach, something that I agree enables inclusive practice and meaningful learning:

Stop attacking things with anger. Don't tackle things with anger and frustration. Start looking at it as, why are they saying them things in the first place? How can I address this in a way that they're going to pay attention to? Incorporate things like humour in that because it's a universal thing. People learn together, you don't have to nitpick, use humour in a positive way. Because the thing is, you see it so much in students when a teacher is negative and horrible, they laugh at them, reacting, and it makes that teacher more angry. And then they get detention and they just laugh about it. They just laugh about it because they want a reaction. [Blight].

<u>Support for trans and nonbinary students</u>

UCAS and Stonewall recommend specific support for LGBT+ students progressing on to higher education and training, the sector where this research takes place (2021, p. 5). They also highlight support for trans individuals, recommending the following:

- Universities and colleges should ensure LGBT+ individuals have tailored and relevant support – such as information and advice, mental health support,

specific services on campuses – as they progress, taking account of their full student experience, including accommodation.
- Given the higher rates of mental health issues, universities and colleges need to ensure support is focussed effectively on LGBT+ people.
- Signpost to LGBT+ support services available within a local area to allow for a much greater level of support.
- Specific focus should be placed on the support for trans individuals, recognising their lower levels of satisfaction and educational attainment, as we seek to level up support and opportunity.
- Further promotion of LGBT+ societies and their wide range of interests by both NUS and individual universities and colleges to enable a greater feeling of inclusivity.

The fourth item regarding support for trans individuals was highlighted by two of my participants, who specifically mentioned how public facing systems such as Microsoft Teams do not protect the social transition of students, in that when they change their gender identity most also change their name, but their legal name still appears in enrolment systems. This could lead to deadnaming trans individuals, an issue that has been highlighted as a matter of concern, since the distress is felt by both the individual and those who care about them (Hansford, 2023). As a reminder, deadnaming is the practice of using a trans or non-binary person's previous name(s), which 'could be accidental or come with the intent to bully, harass, or belittle someone; regardless of intent this can be very painful for trans and non-binary people. Deadnaming may constitute discrimination depending on the context in which it occurs' (NHS Confederation, 2023, p. 80).

A knowing-as-being places nonbinary individuals in a position of empathy toward peers who socially transitioned their gender and name. Dylan, as a non-binary individual, explains their approach when working with queer youth, offering affirmative and supportive strategies regarding navigating institutional systems such as Microsoft Teams, which can open vulnerabilities for trans individuals regarding being deadnamed:

> There are sort of issues around queerness, but there's also kind of issues around where people are within that sort of [transitioning] journey and stuff. So, you will meet students who they'll kind of say 'listen, my real name is this...' And I'm just like, you know what, I don't need your real name. Just give us your student number. Right? I never need to know what is, okay, doesn't matter. You tell me how you prefer to be called. That other name doesn't even need to be in my head. Okay, I'll know your

> student number to contact you. The other stuff, it's a dead name. It's dead. Doesn't need to come into it. And I think you've got to try and find the ways that you can kind of, unfortunately, stick to kind of these policies and stuff where name changes on systems. I don't know, name changes on things like [Microsoft] Teams and stuff, apparently seem to be the hardest thing in the world. But there are, I don't know, there probably are reasons why and I'm probably just like, don't get it, but there are ways around it where you can still kind of give that person that queer joy of like I say, yeah, I accept you. [Dylan].

Matty as a trans male individual also offers insights into the issue of public facing systems such as Microsoft Teams where deadnaming could happen:

> This college seems to be pretty good, but in terms of official name changes on lanyards and [Microsoft] Teams and stuff like that, it's way too lengthy of a process. And it does make you feel like that you're kind of just being dragged around for something that feels very minimal. I feel like in terms of having the name that you go by on, like, obviously I understand official documents if you're not out, and I understand you need to have your birth name on certain documents. But just in terms of stuff that other people are going to see, like in your day-to-day life, I feel like that needs to be addressed because I don't think it should be as big of a hassle as it has been in terms of things that we should continue doing. The amount of support for students, hiring lecturers that are understanding of other students and who will respect them, people who will take that step forward to kind of like when you're monitoring students, being able to see, okay, is this student comfortable? If they're not, why? [Matty].

Blight as a trans male, offered an additional perspective regarding respecting our names as part of our identity. This relates to the first section of identity above, where feeling that those around us using our preferred names or pronouns starts to signal acceptance, which is a core characteristic of belonging:

> The names of people, and especially if they've chosen their name, that's who they are. There's a lot of power in their name and that's why I changed mine. It was kind of like, I want to put my old self to rest. They've been through too much; I can't be me with that [name] anymore. And it wasn't a thing of, I hate my old name or whatnot, it's just a matter of, that's not my name, that's just not what it is. This is my name; this is my identity. [Blight].

I agree with Blight's articulation of why our names matter. I discussed with him my interpretation of inclusion from my professional experience, where the words 'inclusion' and

‘inclusive’ are widely used but the reality is sometimes incongruent with this, especially for minorities:

> From a kind of ideal point of view, inclusion is everyone. But when you sometimes see that queer individuals’ names are not used or not respected, their pronouns are not respected, that means you're not being included. It's as simple as that. So, it's a selective inclusion. You're only included if you fit within fixed ideals of who or what should be included. [Leo].

Matty also shared his experience at college with social transitioning. He felt respected by his lecturer, which contrasted with what he experienced in his secondary school:

> When I started college, obviously, I wasn't out to anybody. So, I got pulled aside by my lecturer at the time like, hey, can you just come through here? So, he pulled us aside into the office and was like, hey, if you want us to address you by a different name, that's fine, you don't have to feel like you need to hide it or anything like that. And that was just like, whoa! Because I remember in secondary school where they would refuse to write Matty on my workbooks and everything, because they were like, oh, well, that's not your name, not writing Matty on your books. It's stupid. [Matty].

The above is sadly a matter that concerns not only educators but also leaders and managers within education. Decision makers, I argue, also need support to address epistemic gaps that are part of the epistemic injustices I highlight in this thesis. Without professional learning about the impact of not supporting queer lives, we could face systemic barriers to enact their inclusion and enable a sense of belonging in post-compulsory education settings. Dylan’s experience illustrates this:

> In my last workplace, I was working in a special needs provision. I was the only tutor there. And I had, like, a team of LSAs [learning assistants] and when it was just me and the LSAs, yeah, could be sort of really open about being queer and stuff like that. And we had younger staff who would ask us questions and were very, very respectful. We taught a lot of LGBTQ stuff, like, we did Pride Month, we did loads of stuff around Trans Visibility Day and things like that. But in terms of some of the management and stuff, they just could not wrap their head around it, and it didn't matter what I said, it didn't seem to get to them. [Dylan].

Supporting educators

This closing section focuses on the second aspect of support that my framework of belonging articulates. In addition to student support, educators are integral to inclusive practice and the enabling of belonging for their students. Therefore, I argue that caring for those who care ought to be part of the moral drive of inclusive initiatives. This section draws on my knowing-as-being queer but also on my work as a teacher educator and researcher. My reflections and interactions with my participants during the interviews are part of the co-construction of meaning from the experiences shared.

I start with an argument about how safety, belonging and self-actualisation (Maslow, 1943; 1954) without support are particularly challenging needs to be met without interdependency. This means that we need one another to meet these. Moreover, to make them part of inclusive education practice, we need to begin with educators learning about these as fundamental to our nature. This aligns to my critique of equal opportunities discourse, where internal and external factors and conditions may mean that some individuals may not realise their full potential, despite being motivated to achieve their goals. I base this on my professional experience in post-compulsory education — a diverse and complex sector, inclusive in nature, and largely sustained by the commitment of its practitioners.

Instead of the Cinderella sector, I agree with Daley et al.'s (2015) metaphor of the twelve dancing princesses, and hooks (1991) view of education as an act of freedom that sometimes needs transgression. Many of us working in education resist neoliberalism and subvert the technologies of the market, because our drive is our students' flourishing; we want the best for them. The work of an educator in post-compulsory education starts with a commitment to supporting their students. This brings a need to meet them where they are, identify their strengths and areas from development, and develop a relationality that understands their needs, goals and motivations as ever changing, rather than in the sequential ways like Maslow (1943, 1954) suggests.

This requires complex and often dilemmatic decision making, which places practitioners working in post-compulsory education in a vulnerable position if they are not themselves supported with professional learning about the emergence of youth being more aware of gender

theory than what we, their educators, learnt when we were young. I consider this updating necessary as part of my articulation of hermeneutical injustices (Fricker, 2007). Not updating our knowledge related to diversity in gender/sexuality could seriously limit our capacity to interpret and address the needs of our students. There is power in normalising this as part of core learning. As Mark articulates, his experience of learning about LGBTQ rights and issues in post-compulsory education meant useful learning not only for himself but for non-queer peers too:

> When you're in a world that's so heteronormative, there's so much like, it's almost like straight is normal and anything LGBTQ is not, it can just make you feel like there's a shadow over you, you don't feel seen. Whereas when teachers make the effort to include this sort of stuff in their studies, especially like for example, sociology, when looking at marriage rates and things. We even looked at statistics including same sex couples and that itself was like a resource that I could use in my essays. Not only was it educational, but it was also informative about same sex couples with students that didn't have that knowledge prior to the lesson. And that sort of inclusion is what I find makes queer students a lot more happy in their lessons. [Mark].

A potential concern around this is the individual preparation and disposition for educators to incorporate LGBTQ+ issues in education. As explored by Connell (2015) lack of personal insight, fear of misrepresentation and credibility are shared concerns among non-queer educators. Ted shared some insights into the need to support more educators to be comfortable around this:

> I think lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, I think that them sort of words are on a bit of a curriculum now. But it's still very much, I think, from reading the research that I've done, is that teachers aren't comfortable on what it's age appropriate. And I think maybe as a society that we have, like, oh, it's private. And I think that's maybe the problem is that it's very much like that. People need to be comfortable and open. [Ted].

The above stems from conflating sex, gender, and sexuality under the umbrella term LGBTQ+. When we start with LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) this implies sexuality and it is understandable why early years educators and parents may be reluctant to include diversity as part of the learning for children and young people (Parveen, 2019). When the learning turns into normalising that some families could have two mums or two dads, same-sex love is normalised, which is most needed in wider social practice (BBC, 2014; Townsend, 2013). As I

argued in queering habitus (Morantes-Africano, 2023), children could then start forming a habitus that understands diversity as natural rather than deviant.

This also applies to educators. Having epistemic gaps or misconceptions regarding the difference between desire, behaviour, and identity (Altman, 2018) aggravates the unpreparedness of some educators to act compassionately towards their students. For this reason, I argue that making gender theory part of the professional learning for educators is important to support the student experience and the development of a sense of belonging in the course they are undertaking, the place where they study, the fields of knowledge and practice they want to belong to, or the group of people they want to connect with. Although most of my participants' accounts are positive about their experience at college, Hunter gave an example of a HE lecturer who had clear epistemic gaps related to gender diversity:

> He would scoff, roll his eyes, wouldn't pay attention, wouldn't interact with us. And I think the other students, I think we were all part of the LGBT by some shape or form. And when we addressed it, we were told that we were the ones bullying him because we were singling him out. Well, I don't understand. He said things once about women in different industries and how there is no such thing as women being discriminated [against], and things like engineering and stuff. And it's very closed minded, and it's like there it is, and we're giving you the evidence, and we're giving you our statements and our personal experiences as all of us were assigned female at birth, we have a right to kind of speak about this. He just seemed like he just didn't want to listen, didn't want to open up to that fact. It was alarming because we were also aware that he taught in that college. [Hunter].

During the interview with Ted, I shared a reflection about how my research intentions go beyond education: 'I came into my research mostly thinking and reflecting about teachers, but this also relates to parents and how unprepared most parents may be to raise and support children who are queer' [Leo]. Also, how my research negotiates a range of perspectives, from what is published from systematic research to how the topics I explore exist in everyday life:

> It's interesting when you think about academic research, you think about reading journals and papers and books. But actually, the topic I'm researching is very much about day-to-day life. It's about the interactions that humans have with each other, with the people in the cafe, with people who they bump into at the pub, but also social media and television. [Leo].

The above reflection stems from my own queer ontology, which has been socially constructed rather than essentialist. My parents and the parents of many queer individuals are loving but none the wiser regarding the challenges of being queer in a heteronormative environment. This is exacerbated by socio-cultural misunderstandings of being born LGBTQ+ as a lifestyle (Pew Research Centre, 2013). For this reason, addressing epistemic gaps related to gender/sexual diversity is important for all. If teachers and students learn about this together, they are in a stronger position to be inclusive and even accepting of natural diversity. As I shared during one of the interviews:

> In my experience, being born in the middle of the Andes in the tiniest town, you would never ever see two men holding hands, for example, inconceivable. But part of my thinking now is, why not? Perhaps it's because it's not seen enough, therefore it doesn't become part of your reality. [Leo].

However, Blight shares my concern regarding the issues extending beyond the classroom. Home is a major influence on students' dispositions toward gender/sexual diversity:

> There's also that problem where you do have a tutor or a teacher who puts a good effect on students and then that student goes home and talks to their parents about it and the parents flag up that teacher saying, you're teaching my child things I don't want them to know. And it's like, what am I meant to do? [Blight]

A successful example of incorporating gender theory as part of teacher education is provided by Kollmayer et al. (2020). They developed a pilot called REFLECT for secondary school teachers in Austria to challenge gender stereotypes related to students' career prospects. Their methodology involved students and teachers learning and reflecting together about gender theory and how it relates to fields of knowledge and practice. They report that their pilot not only made teachers 'see gender differences as less unchangeable, but also gave them confidence for promoting their students' motivation regardless of their gender' (p. 6). I support this type of approach to address our epistemic gaps related to gender and the inequalities that stem from it. I argue that this type of learning is necessary for everybody, not only teachers and students, because diversity exists everywhere.

Dylan articulates how inclusive practice requires commitment from education to their students, which demands a lot from those who care:

> I think [inclusive practice] is an incredibly hard thing to do. It's something I've had to do in my own practice. I taught students who hated female presenting people and had thoughts about their roles and stuff like that, and very much didn't respect somebody that looked a bit female teaching them and things like that. But I think a lot of it is like, make the effort to go out and educate yourself on these things because I think it essentially falls under safeguarding. And safeguarding for me is like it's above everything else. If you have a student or a young person or whatever who can't learn, their learning is being blocked by these kinds of barriers to their life, where their needs aren't being met, or they've got these kinds of additional needs. It's not enough to just kind of go, well, I just want to come in and teach my lessons and that's it. It doesn't work like that. That's one quite small part of your role. And I think there are unfortunately, a lot of teachers who they get into it and they do think that you're going to come in, you're going to teach your lessons, you're going to mark some books and that's it. Actually, you have to take on the burden of these young people's emotions and their lives. And of course there's limits to that, but ultimately you could potentially be their only safe space and that holds weight, and you need to think about that. You would never, ever hear a teacher go, I don't need to learn about knife crime because that doesn't affect me. Actually, it really, really does because it affects these students. And while I'm not suggesting that you've got to pour your whole world into it, but teaching does take up a lot of your time. It's a hell of a job. [Dylan].

As a summary of this section, I highlight how ‘caring for those who care’ is an essential component to realise belonging. It would be unfair to ask educators to be inclusive and support their students’ belonging without support. Learning about students’ needs, barriers to learning but also their strengths, goals and aspirations is part of the foundations on which to build the structures and practices that can enable students’ belonging in their chosen fields of study. This sets the scene for the third and concluding chapter of the analysis and discussion of the data generated with the participants, focusing on teachers to posit teaching as an ethical praxis.

Chapter six: ethical praxis

This section addresses the third research intention, focusing on the learning from the themes identified in the previous two chapters and their meaning for teachers and teaching. By synthesising common threads that connect theory and pedagogical practice, three salient examples of educational practice are put forward in this:

1) Pen portraits: Knowing our students is important. Early identification of their identities, needs, and motivations can help educators put in place supportive strategies.

2) Icebreakers: during group formation, enabling students to become familiar with one another and find common interests can foster a sense of shared humanity.

3) Representation matters: educators' attitudes towards inclusion are evident to students when they witness or experience how they navigate ethical challenges.

These are part of the reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2023) undertaken from the data generated with the research participants in their epistemic capacity of knowers-as-beings. However, there is a subversive, almost hacking move made against traditional thematic analysis. I am 'plugging-in' (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013, 2023) my experience and expertise as teacher educator to connect my own theorisation of belonging to its practical implications for teachers and teaching. This is a methodological decision that embraces the pluriverse (Koro, 2021) or methods and methodologies available to carry out qualitative research. As Jackson and Mazzei (2013) explain,

> An assemblage isn't a thing — it is 'the process of making and unmaking the thing. It is the *process* of arranging, organizing, fitting together. So to see it at work, we have to ask not only how things are connected but also what territory is claimed in that connection. To consider what happens in the process of "plugging in" multiple machines in this assemblage and to ask what new territories are claimed within the field of qualitative research methods' (emphasis in original, p. 262).

This means a claiming of educational practice as ethical praxis, which is defined by Kemmis and Smith (2008, p. 16) as doing the right thing, rather than only thinking about ethical action:

> To do the right thing (praxis) in uncertain circumstances, when we are faced by perplexity or puzzles about what one should do in any particular circumstances, requires deliberation – consideration of what one is really doing in this situation, and what different kinds of consequences will follow for different people if one decides to do one thing rather than another.

This aligns to the ethos of this thesis, as my conceptualisation of belonging is not confined to a theoretical and abstract realm but to the daily activities and interactions that we have with our students to guide their learning. Praxis as a self-creative activity invites us to make the world. As Bottomore (1991, p. 437), asserts praxis is a philosophy that transcends ideas to become action. In my case, I focus on pedagogical practice. Ethical praxis involves a critical interrogation not only of the structures and systems of oppression but of our part in it too (Freire, 1972).

Pen portraits: identifying students' identities, needs and motivations

In my pedagogical practice I champion the use of student profiles, also called pen portraits, to identify background information of new students' disciplinary knowledge, skills, behaviours, special educational needs, and any other useful information that could help support their educational experience and positive outcomes. In addition to the work of University College London (2020), the projects and scholarly outputs of Thomas (2012) and Thomas et al. (2020) related to belonging initiatives is inspiring. For example, Thomas et al. (2020) developed a project titled #Ibelong, led by Edge Hill University in the UK, working in partnership with a range of European universities to 'improve the belonging of diverse students in higher education' (para 1.). One of the strategies employed was to ask students to write: *"I want you to know this about me…,"* and *"You can support me to be successful by…."* The table below offers examples of the students' contributions of background information of their identities, needs and motivations:

I want you to know this about me…	You can support me to be successful by…
I have started university before and left because of anxiety.	Supporting me with anxiety and keeping an eye on me.

I get really easily anxious and can make myself sick from worry at times.	Reassuring me with things throughout the year.
I have anxiety and often have trouble introducing myself to new people.	Simply say hello if I look lost, unsure, or alone, please.
I will throughout my 3 years here ask millions of questions. I am very confident but, also very unsure at times.	Answering all my questions happily.
It has been a good while since I had a decent English, Science and Mathematics lesson, so I will need a lot of help when it comes to assignments, and more.	Perhaps just give me a lot of guidance on how I should go about these things.
If sometimes I seem quiet or awkward or a bit weird it's just because I'm socially awkward and I don't know how to react so please don't take it personally.	Giving me space and knowledge I need to grow and learn at EHU.
I am a mature student who hasn't been in education for seven years, this makes me bloody terrified about what is to come.	Being patient and prepared to answer 'stupid' questions.
I get confused over the simple things.	Making instructions as simple as possible.
I should be able to belong, but I'm stressed about it	Encouraging me to push myself.
I am a single parent who doesn't always believe that she is good enough	Listening to me when I have concerns or doubts, and by understanding the conflicting issues I face.
I'm really shy naturally	Creating opportunities for us to work on our confidence
I struggle with academic writing	Making the instructions for writing clear and guide me when needed.
I am quite shy and will worry about asking for help.	Asking if I'm OK.

Table 2. Example of students' contributions as part of the *#Ibelong* project

As a result of this dissertation, I have been incorporating aspects of identity such as gender pronouns into my practice. I found this pedagogically powerful for inclusive practice. At the time of interviewing Nick, he has finished his teaching qualification at MyCampus, and he

referred to the value of developing student profiles for educators to identify their students' identity, needs and motivations:

> I think it's something that we could have in student profiles and stuff. It's something that obviously you could put on there. I've seen it myself when I've got my own student profiles for my classes. I've seen that some of them do want to be referred to as, like, they/them. So obviously that's something I've got to take into account, something that I've got to remember as well because obviously I don't want to be misgendering anyone. I feel it's really useful. [Nick].

His awareness of the need to identify our students' identity to avoid misgendering them is a good example of ethical praxis. Like the #Ibelong project, involving students to generate insights into specific needs could enable educators to help them more effectively too. Nick further emphasised the normalisation of gender identity as part of the professional learning that would be useful for educators:

> I feel like just being made aware of it. I feel like it's something you probably should, like everyone should, be taught about nowadays. Obviously with it becoming a lot more of an emergent thing, it's not something that is just kind of going to fade away in a couple of years. For example, it's pretty much like here, it's accepted now, so I don't see why it shouldn't be something that isn't taught alongside a lot of other important things. [Nick].

I echo Nick's view of gender identity being part of core learning, regardless of one's gender identification, as a tool for interpreting and navigating social interactions. As highlighted in some of the examples offered by Thomas et al. (2020), shyness and anxiety are common themes. These resonate with the aspects of anxieties related to queer onto-epistemologies shared by my participants. An analysis of how educators could support this led to the next theme of the use of icebreakers or collaborative activities to enable student interaction, enabling the identification, and sharing of common interests, and experiences. This, for a conceptualisation of belonging, could be a pedagogically powerful move to learn that we could inter-relate to each other more through what we have in common than what makes us different.

Icebreakers: fostering practices that identify shared humanity

In my professional experience as a teacher educator, I observe educational practice in a vast range of settings, ages, and subject areas. Regarding students' behaviour, I have noticed that in

some contexts, students form clusters, perhaps based on intersectional aspects of their identity. This means that they may gravitate toward those who they feel a sort of connection, empathy, or shared characteristics. It could be it that they belong to a family of immigrants, are of the same gender, come from the same school or live in the same area. This is not problematic per se, but those types of gravitational pulls could be harnessed to foster learning from those who are different from us too. This means finding shared humanity regardless of our ethnicity, gender, sexuality, social background or any other 'added extra' (Taylor et al., 2010, p. 1) characteristic that makes us uniquely configured and for many uniquely challenged. This can also help educators to find genuine opportunities to interact with their students and peers (Vitello et al., 2020) and identify valuable information *about* and *from* them.

From professional experience, this can be possible when we make an effort to overtly discuss the power of learning from others. Perspectives are powerful to make sense of our experiences (Brookfield, 2017; Morantes-Africano, 2022), and educators can and should enable these types of connections as part of their classroom management to foster an inclusive learning environment. This would require including Tuckman and Jensen's (1977, p. 426) model of small group development of 'forming, storming, norming, performing and adjourning'. When new students join us, the newness of being in a new environment, with new people, and for many in a new context, can inevitably generate anxieties. This is specially daunting for queer individuals. The implication for teachers and teaching regarding this is that safety, including psychological safety, is a precondition for new students to start developing a sense of belonging in the educational spaces we want them to occupy. Icebreakers can be a pedagogically powerful tool to start developing those aspects of connection, inter-being, and relationality needed for belonging. Educators can promote inclusive communities in diverse classrooms by tuning into the social dynamics of their students (Farmer et al., 2019). It can also help students to form positive relationships with peers from the outset, especially if they have had limited experience of human diversity.

During one of the interviews, I explained my pedagogical approach to social interactions where I experience hostility towards queerness:

> I've taken the approach of being more educational, like, let's explore that. Why do you think that? No judgement, just trying to understand people's thinking. I try to help people by planting the seeds of doubt about their assumptions. I think that has been quite powerful, but it takes time, if you think about it. I use myself as an example, because it's taking me also a long time to understand the relationship between sex,, gender, and sexuality. But also, to realise an internalised form of homophobia, because we have been raised with the idea of being you is wrong. This is why I am very interested in kind of making belonging a guiding principle, especially in teacher education. I do a lot of icebreakers. And it's because of my own experience of wanting to belong but feeling too different. In my work I try to make students feel that you are supposed to be here; and that this place, this space, is yours. There is no need to hide, you can take space, basically. Because I've also seen from a physical point of view when people try to hide away and be in a corner. and be little, and be quiet, all of that really means 'I am afraid of taking up too much space.' But sometimes it's a right to say, you have the right to be loud, to have the space, to be colourful, to be goth, and so on. You are in a safe space here, so embracing your difference is going to be important. But it kind of takes a very specific type of person, type of teacher to do that kind of thing. [Leo].

From a praxis perspective, UCAS and Stonewall (2021) recommend that the implementation of an inclusive curriculum and fostering a positive learning environment could greatly improve the student experience of LGBTQ+ students in both compulsory and post-compulsory education. It involves 'creating visible LGBT+ friendly policies and environments to promote inclusion, including anti-bulling policies' and 'enhanced awareness of support available for LGBT+ individuals as they progress with their next steps' (p. 6). They also highlight that the Department for Education continues to fund 'anti-bullying initiatives to train school and college staff in England and provide support for pupils affected by homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying' (p. 6). In addition, I would recommend the need for learning from, and with, students on issues related to gender inequalities. This includes exploring diversity within gender/sexuality identities and expressions, and the issues that many minorities face due to hegemonic ideologies and practices. As Matty and Hunter suggest, educating the educators should be part of an ethics of care:

> I think there needs to be more education in secondary schools for lecturers who are doing teacher training in terms of how to support those students. Because I don't know. Obviously, I haven't been through a PGCE where it does address secondary students, but with the way that I have had treatment from certain secondary lecturers, I feel like there needs to be more about that, or at least some sort of vetting process before hiring. That shows that that person is genuinely dedicated to helping students outside of just like an educational basis, but just being able to know how to support them. Because I don't think that there's enough of that, especially in that sort of area. [Matty].

> If teachers aren't aware of what they're seeing and how they're behaving, they aren't aware of the impact and how that might be affecting this child. And we shouldn't go back to segregating the students based on differences. Oh, god, no. We shouldn't go back to that. Even though [discrimination] is still evident; it is there, just not as severe. But there needs to be training for teachers like, of course, regarding their impact. Not just what they teach, but what they say, how they act, how they behave, how they interact with students. [Hunter].

This last point leads to the third salient theme related to ethical praxis. Educators are pivotal in the implementation of inclusive initiatives. However, if they have limited understanding of the reasons to include certain demographics, or why they have protected characteristics, their readiness to act in the face of injustice could be superseded by other instrumentalist agendas (Biesta, 2022). For this reason, caring for those who care via professional learning is important, otherwise they are part of the epistemic injustices (Fricker, 2007) that thwart the virtue goals of democracy and social justice.

Teachers' attitudes

This third theme aligns closely to my professional practice as teacher educator for the post-compulsory education sector. In chapter four, exploring experiences and perspectives, I articulated how we start forming our understanding and dispositions towards what is right and wrong gender identity and performance from an early age. A heteronormative socialisation creates tensions when those who lack the interpretive tools to understand non-heteronormative configurations of sex-gender-sexuality as naturally occurring in human diversity, see it as a lifestyle and/or a deviant choice. Many educators may have experienced heteronormative socialisation themselves, influencing their attitudes, beliefs, and responses towards queerness. As I argued in queering habitus (Morantes-Africano, 2023, pp. 245-246),

> The notion that people should be heterosexuals to be accepted in the social space is inculcated through early socialisation – by family, friends, schooling, the media, and in many cases religion (Epstein 1994; Moon 2010). From a very early age children are forced into gendered types of play, pronouns, and clothing, and tacitly (or otherwise) praised or chastised for their gender performance. A gendered habitus is inculcated as a norm, which 'classifies people, practices and objects as masculine and feminine' (Sayer 2005, 24). Such norms are not the same as rules or laws (Butler 1990), they are forms of social power that produce 'the intelligible field of subjects, and an apparatus by which the gender binary is instituted' (Butler 2004, 48).

This aligns with Fowler and Wootton (2024, p. 11) concern about our collective awareness of the relationship between 'power, knowledge and normativity', which is crucial to decolonise social spaces and practices such as education. Moreover, they argue that 'teacher–student relationships, peer interactions, and denies students the tools to effectively challenge compulsory heteronormativity or help them work through deeper levels of cognitive dissonance (p. 11)'. A main point to highlight here is that this type of learning happens through the *passibility* described by Roth (2011) in a critique of constructivist learning. Bullying is an example of this, as it happens through the microaggressions, jokes, comments, and 'vibe' that we receive in social interaction from those around us. Teachers are part of the complex mesh of messengers sending messages, inadvertently or otherwise, about how to respond to queerness. For example, Mark comments on his school experience about his teachers' attitudes to negative dispositions to gender/sexual diversity:

> There were a few trans individuals in my year group, but I could see because they were just trying to express themselves… it was genuinely shocking to see just the discussion, that you would hear people back chatting. [Trans classmates were] just having to take hate when they're just trying to go into school. And the teachers would hear it, but they wouldn't say anything about it. They wouldn't make the effort to go forward and educate these children. [Mark].

Further, Mark observes how,

> in the old high school that I had, we had a queer recognition day where it was meant to be like informing students that same sex relationships and families exist. But again, students were just going in completely ignorant, laughing, making jokes about it. The teachers were there, people kept speaking, they had special spokespeople in, and students were laughing in front of them. Yet the teachers didn't do anything about it. [Mark].

The impact of this type of learning is that students may gradually lose faith in their teachers, and their capacity to keep all safe (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016). As expressed by many of my participants, their educational experience was indeed shaped by witnessing, or experiencing themselves, symbolic violence in school. This resulted for many in anxieties, low self-esteem, and a thwarted sense of belonging in educational spaces and/or with groups of people. However, post-compulsory education emerged as a context for possibilities, new beginnings, and opportunities to be and become. For example, in contrast to his experiences at school, Ted considers college as the place where he started to feel that he belonged:

> Even [though] in secondary school there were some good teachers, and I did quite well in my exams and GCSEs, I did feel like towards the end of school, I didn't feel like I belonged. The way I've been treated here [at college] I think it's lovely how they've got the student union. I was a part of that for a little bit. And about inclusion, they do do a bit. And it's like the tribes. They do different things to make everyone feel included, not just LGBT, I think. [Ted].

Similarly, Matty's account of a clear ethos of inclusivity at college showed a contrasting experience to what he experienced in school.

> [at college] they don't have a tolerance for that stuff. They [the teachers] try to remove those people from the environment relatively quickly, or they'll talk to them. I've had experiences like that when I was tackling issues. Yeah. There was students who had consistently throughout the year, been making questionable comments and after talking to the lecturer that I was working with at the time, had said to us 'yeah, they're not coming on to second year. They don't deserve a place. I don't care how talented they are, they don't deserve a place here. They're making students uncomfortable. And we don't stand for that'. Which I really respected, because comparing it to the experience that I had in secondary school, I was like, if that was the same situation, that would have just let them continue because of talent reasons, it wouldn't have been anything to do with how they made everybody else feel and stuff like that. So, they got completely sacked off the course after that, just because of that. [Matty].

My reply was: 'Okay. That is a very interesting approach in terms of supporting rather than removing you' [Leo]. Matty continued,

> I mean, it's stuff that it wasn't the very first interaction they had with that. They did try talking to them saying 'these comments aren't appropriate in this college, please stop, you're making people uncomfortable. If you want to talk about it, that's fine, but make sure it's in a controlled setting where you're not being disrespectful'. And it just continued from them. So, they were like, they're not coming on a second year because of that. [Matty].

However, I wondered if the students in this scenario are part of the hermeneutical injustices (Fricker, 2007) that are rooted in a collective lack of interpretive tools regarding trans lives. Given that teachers' attitudes towards inclusion are fundamental for pedagogical practice (Fernandes, 2022), we ought to support them with professional learning. Their lack of preparation to tackle issues like those expressed by Mark align with my concern for epistemic injustices (Fricker, 2007) rooted in a lack of interpretive or communicative tools to make sense of experience (Fricker, 2014). To further argue my point about the need to offer more support

to educators to understand not only the theory but the rationale and operationalisation of inclusive practice, I compare health with education. A general practitioner (GP) is different from a specialist, and in this way equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) initiatives are broad categories of intentions and/or practices, whereas supporting specific needs of students require specific knowledge and experience for effective interventions to be put in place. In this way, educators can be good EDI generalists, but diversity is complex, and educators deserve more support through professional learning around specific ways to identify and support student needs. It is worth noting that my work does not align to the view of needs as deficiencies. Belonging as a need is not something that we lack but an innate condition for survival and wellbeing as social species. This leads to my final reflections about the implications of the theorisation of belonging for teachers and teaching.

Chapter seven: belonging as a matter of social justice

This closing chapter returns to a reflection and evaluation of the research intentions, which are to:

1. Analyse subjective accounts of LGBTQ+ students' educational experience
2. Interpret which factors are salient to inform student belonging in post-compulsory education
3. Draw learning from the above for teachers and teaching.

This knowledge project aimed to interpret the experiences and perspectives of ten self-identified LGBTQ+ students about their educational journeys, and whether their queer identities influenced them. The rationale for the research stemmed from an ethical and professional concern regarding the widely documented hostility, rejection and forms of violence that many queer individuals experience in social practice, including education. This contrasts to characterisations of feeling accepted, respected, connected, and valued, which are part of belonging as a fundamental human need. For this reason, my work claims that belonging is a matter of social justice for queer individuals. Although we also find stories of resilience, compassion and solidarity that offset those of tribulation, the issue remains human-created and susceptible to change. In this way, the ethos of this thesis required a queer and critical approach to interrogate systems and structures that sustain inequalities. This includes rejecting essentialist claims of compulsory heterosexuality as natural, and queerness as deviant. Also, being critical about modernist and outdated conceptions of gender as a binary, thus sharing the ethos of theorists such as Butler (1990, 2004b), Griffin (2020), Harding (2023), Samuel (2013), and Yep (2002, 2004). Furthermore, this project questions deterministic attitudes that condone injustices. We are not mere characters in a story written by destiny, we can and ought to start changing what does not serve us to advance the projects of democracy and social justice. I summarise and evaluate below each of the three research intentions, in the order presented in the data analysis:

Chapter four: experiences and perspectives

Chapter five: framework of student belonging in post-compulsory education

Chapter six: ethical praxis

Research aim one was met by adopting a standpoint epistemology that values the situatedness of minoritised individuals as 'expert' knowers-as-beings, grounded on the lived-experience. This posited the ten self-identified LGBTQ+ individuals who volunteered to take part in the semi-structured interviews, in a privileged position to make epistemic contributions around inclusive educational practices. Their interpretations of ways in which their queer onto-epistemologies shaped their educational experience, allowed an analysis of root causes. For example, their heteronormative socialisation was a main driver for the symbolic violence they experienced and/or witnessed in school. This was salient as a major influence on the type of learning influencing our dispositions towards right and wrong gender identity and expression. Resultantly, this deeply affected some of my participants' sense of acceptance, respect, and value, especially during their formative years in school. A salient thread in their stories was that of school as challenging and, for some, traumatic, but also of how post-compulsory education offered new beginnings and possibilities to be and become. Their accounts also shared perspectives on future directions, dreams and imaginings of how education could be more inclusive toward queer individuals. Experiencing other queer individuals actively seeking change through education affirmed my pedagogical praxis. I am not alone in this journey to align what I do with who I am and why I do it (Morantes-Africano, 2024), through my work in education. There is power in a MeToo style connection with other people's experience. This influenced the development of the model of belonging that I presented in chapter five.

The most comprehensive characterisations of belonging engage psychological and sociological perspectives. All agree that belonging is a fundamental human need. This means interpreting individual and subjective aspects, while being situated and contingent within external objective conditions of participation and of belonging as a fundamental human need. The analysis of the subjective aspects of belonging yielded four personal dimensions that we must consider for student belonging in education: 1) identity, 2) personality, 3) needs, and 4) motivations. I also proposed that these can only be possible with institutional opportunities to access education, and support to achieve goals and aspirations. In addition to student support, my framework

uniquely argues that educators are central to connect the subjective and personal dimensions of belonging with the institutional apparatus that could make student belonging more prominent.

A key message of my framework is that we ought to care more for those who care, meaning that educators need professional learning about ways to make their practice more inclusive. Regarding caring behaviours for queer individuals there are several steps that can and should be taken. Paying attention to who might need their identity affirmed, using their preferred gender pronouns, avoiding deadnaming trans students, or liaising with pastoral or mental health support services can be life affirming. These are small but important steps to support their safety and wellbeing as a precondition to develop a sense of belonging. More broadly, my framework of belonging succeeded to negotiate how to include queer and non-queer students in the dimensions proposed. For example, many of our students may join further or higher education with a self-belief of not being academic enough, intelligent enough, or not embodying what they perceive to be a college/university student. These types of self-identifications are susceptible to be changed and are perhaps part of our self-discovery and become integral part of our educational journeys.

At the core of these seven dimensions of belonging there is the message that *to be queer is to be human*. In this way, not knowing how to support queer students is a case of epistemic injustice for both the students who may feel neglected and educators who may be unaware of what to do or why. Our identity is part of our humanity, and not respecting queer individuals' names, gender identities or gender pronouns is an attack on humanity. An important epistemic contribution from my participants is that our identity is multilayered, complex, and in constant negotiation of aspects of ourselves that are core to our nature with some that change as part of our journeys and life trajectories of being and becoming. For LGBTQ+ students transitioning from compulsory to post-compulsory education, it means a negotiation of multiple and multidimensional aspects of geographic, social, academic and identity transitions (. As my participants emphasised, their LGBTQ+ identities are core, natural and non-fungible, meaning that are not susceptible to be changed. There are, however, other aspects of their identity which have changed as part of the questioning of the stories that they internalised about themselves.

For example, that a socially constructed queer subject is not inherently wrong, needs to hide who they love, or must compromise their authentic selves to be safe in social practice.

While gender/sexual identity is considered here part of our core essence, and worthy of dignity and respect, it is also an essential component of how we see ourselves and the groups we belong to. In this way belonging is multidimensional; we may simultaneously belong to multiple group identities. Those internal aspects of ourselves inform our personality and behaviour. A guiding question used to conceptualise aspects of personality in this thesis has been 'what I am like?'. For queer individuals this could range from anxious about how others might react to them, to comfortable and confident about their ability to navigate social life. Interacting with others is part of most educational settings, meaning that paying attention to our students' dynamics with one another is vital. This is especially important for individuals who have experienced trauma and need to feel safe and supported in their learning environment. I suggested that both identifying students' background through pen portraits and using icebreakers can help us find connection and shared humanity with an otherwise 'othered' or minoritised individual. An implication for educators supporting queer students is to consider moving away from tolerance of gender/sexual minorities and lean towards the respect and dignity that all bodies and identities deserve.

There is power in the affirmation of our gender/sexual identities rather than considering them a choice. Educators are in a position to support this, but without professional learning and a clear message about the ethics behind this, any attempt to build the conditions for student belonging in post-compulsory education could be thwarted. For example, through misunderstandings of what constitutes an identity worthy of affirmation versus a behaviour which can be managed. A key message from my research participants, which resonates with my own queer onto-epistemology, is that none of us chose to be queer, therefore any form of conversion therapy should be banned (Ban Conversion Therapy, 2024). The existential predicament for a trans person to exist, to live with a gender label assigned to them; and for many a name, a body and expectations that do not fit with their authentic selves, requires affirmative practices as an ethics of care.

In addition to identity and personality, aspects of fundamental human needs and motivations were explored. By borrowing from Maslow (1943, 1954) his five main categories of needs—physiological, safety, love and belonging, self-esteem and actualisation—I sketched some practical ideas for educators to consider how to address some of these in the classroom. Addressing physiological needs, I highlighted the need to understand toilets as gendered spaces which are non-inclusive for trans and non-binary individuals. Safety was highlighted as a salient theme in the discussions with participants around intolerance, bullying, and rejection, which ultimately creates an internalised anxiety and uneasiness about being in heteronormative spaces or practices. Love and belonging were highlighted through the contrast between school and college environments. Participants started developing a sense of belonging, acceptance and respect from peers and teachers alike when they transitioned to post-compulsory education. Finally, self-actualisation becomes an aspect of ethical praxis, in that access to education without support to succeed is not opportunity (Tinto, 2008).

The fourth and last subjective dimension relates to the drives and motivations of our students to join fields of knowledge and/or practice, and the desire to be associated with specific groups of people, practices, and institutions. From these four aspects of belonging, a key message for education and educators is that knowing as much as possible of our students' identities, backgrounds, needs, and motivations is vital. This knowledge can help us support their student experience and outcomes. This leads to the last chapter of the analysis, in which I focused on pedagogical practice and its ethical implications through the notion of praxis.

In positing praxis as an expectation of educators, I urge them to adopt an ethical stance to act via small but life-affirming pedagogical practices that regain 'the humanity denied by injustice' (Freire, 1970, p. 92), which many queer individuals experience. One of the concerns highlighted throughout this thesis is that hermeneutical injustices (Fricker, 2007) are a type of injustice that concerns queer ontologies. Asking educators to support individuals they may not understand, due to a lack of individual or collective interpretive tools, can be a major barrier to enact praxis. For this reason, the professional learning of gender theory ought to be considered important to equip educators with interpretive and communicative tools to address specific needs. This is especially important as new knowledge, and new language has been introduced

in social practice. Not updating educators could lead to furthering chasms between those with epistemic goods and those without them. Epistemic injustices extend beyond lack of knowledge, it also implies lack of communicative tools and participation in communicative practices (Kidd, Medina & Pohlhaus, 2017).

The main ethos threading compassion, empathy, and the understanding of others, implies an acknowledgment of our own epistemic gaps and/or limited experiences. It is both an act of bravery and vulnerability to admit that we are ignorant about something. Yet, brave spaces in educational practice can open the door to conversations that could help us clarify misconceptions or educate one another about human diversity (Arao & Clemens, 2013). Without challenging our assumptions, we could simply continue reproducing hegemonic discourse. As Lorde (1984) argues, 'the master's tool will never dismantle the master's house'. However, when one of such tools is heteronormativity, educators can dismantle structures of oppression through pedagogical praxis. This means that the inequalities experienced by queer students in educational settings can, and ought to be addressed, in situ, and with learning. For this, a pedagogical praxis asks that difficult topics such as inequalities, are talked about more, rather than sidelined under the pretext that it is not part of a given curriculum, or that it only affects a small proportion of the student population. We ought to support educators with professional learning about diverse queer onto-epistemologies, gender theories, and ways to enact affirmative and supportive strategies. I would argue that anti-bullying policies only reify the othering of queerness. Educators have the symbolic power to critically interrogate what of their teaching aligns to forming 'docile bodies' (Foucault, 1975) ready for employability but less about the solidarity required for human flourishing. This is important, as current discourse on the purposes of education stresses employability as the end goal to form individuals ready to make 'immediate and productive inputs to the economy' (Tight, 2024, p. 551).

This thesis, closely aligned to my professional practice as teacher educator, looks at a grassroots approach to enable belonging as a human right and a human capability. To support students to develop a sense of belonging, we need educators to be aware of what to look for. In this way, the epistemic contributions from the queer onto-epistemologies explored here offer a unique contribution that need to be more visible as part of learning. However, when

considering belonging a matter of social justice, we must also consider who might not be here to make an epistemic contribution. This is the issue of silenced voices. In this way, it is worth noting an important limitation of the knowledges presented in this thesis; it could be one of *survivorship bias*. Eldridge (2024, para. 1) defines this as a 'logical error in which attention is paid only to those entities that have passed through (or "survived") a selective filter, which often leads to incorrect conclusions'. In the case of this research, voluntary participation meant benefiting from the stories of those who had something to say but may be missing the accounts of lived experience of those who may not have the communicative or interpretive tools to make sense of their experience. This from a perspective of belonging means that we consider those who secured a place in a course in post-compulsory education. However, we do not have the experiences and perspectives of those who did not 'make it', or were unbelonged from education through exclusion, including self-exclusion.

In this way, belonging requires institutional awareness of what it means to offer prospective students access to educational opportunities. Referring to Singh's (2018) point of unbelonging that results from physical exclusion from learning communities and spaces, it is important to start with placing our students in the best possible conditions for them to succeed. This, as highlighted above, can be possible when we find likeminded people, or common ground through our subject specific interests, plus reading the environment and ethos of the place we are about to enrol in. Once students start their educational journey, supporting them to find common ground with those joining the course can be pedagogically powerful, in that we start developing connection via our shared humanity. Focusing on what unite us, rather than what makes us different, can help us negotiate our identities to foster a sense of belonging (Lee & LaDousa, 2015). A main point to highlight here is that having a place in a course without support to succeed places additional barriers for some students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Opportunities come with clear expectations regarding what is required of us, but also with institutional support to achieve them.

Educators in their capacity to interact with students are in a privileged position to get to know them and be not only a representative of the institution but also that human who cares about their journeys. Belonging as justice requires that educators care, and we ought to care more for

those who care. Audits, inspections, and metrics cannot have more value than caring behaviours. I urge a shift of gaze from my position of knower-as-teacher-educator. Post-compulsory education is largely sustained by practitioners committed to supporting their students, however their practice is currently challenged by neoliberal agendas that narrowly define the meaning and purpose of education. In contrast to this, I agree with Kemmis and Smith (2008, p.16) who remind us that,

> education is necessarily a moral activity. It requires that the teacher (in this case as an educator) has some idea of what might be in the interests of the self-development of each individual learner and for the good for humankind. It requires that the teacher knows more than how to get this particular learner to learn this particular piece of knowledge or to attain this particular learning outcome. It also requires having some idea of what is good for the self development of learners and having some idea about what the good for humankind consists in. The educator cannot move in a moral vacuum, or take a 'value-free' or 'value-neutral' view of what learning outcomes are worth achieving. Someone who wants to be considered an educator – not only a teacher – must have some view of what constitutes 'the good' for individuals and the good for humankind.

I conclude this thesis with a message that summarises the uniqueness of queer solidarity – this thesis and my pedagogical praxis shares this ethos.

> *No one belongs in the closet. But if you're safer inside, I'll guard the door.*
>
> *If you ever need someone safe to come out to, I'm here. No judgement, just support and love.*
>
> *If your family doesn't support you, you are part of my family now.*

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Appendices

Participant information sheet

Consent form

Privacy notice

Indicative themes and questions

University of Glasgow

College of Social Sciences

Participant Information Sheet

Study title: **Experiences and perspectives of LGBTQ+ students around belonging in learning environments**

Researcher: Mr. Leonardo Morantes-Africano, 2508911A@student.gla.ac.uk / Leonardo.Morantes-Africano@ncl-coll.ac.uk / 0191 200 4262.
Supervisor: Prof. Robert Davis, Robert.Davis@glasgow.ac.uk / 01413303468

Invitation to participate:

You are being invited to take part in my doctoral research study. I am a queer teacher educator interested in the theory and practice of inclusion in education. Before you decide to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Also, please contact me, Leo (the researcher), if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information about the research. Taking part in this research is completely voluntary and will have no impact whatsoever on your studies or academic outcomes, present or future. Take some time to decide whether you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading this.

The purpose of this educational project is to draw learning from the experiences and perspectives of LGBTQ+ students around inclusive practice in education. For this, the study focuses on the notion of belonging in educational settings. Belonging means both a physical and psychological feel of being accepted, valued, and respected. Your voice, experiences, and ideas on this might help education and educators to inform their future practice. If you wish to take part, please ensure that you:

1) Are a current college student in either further or higher education
2) Are over the age of 18
3) Self-identify as LGBTQ+
4) Consider that being LGBTQ+ has had an impact on your educational journey
5) Are prepared to discuss how and why being from a gender/sexual minority has made a difference to their sense of belonging to institutions or groups of people
6) Are able to manage the recollection of specific experiences where belonging was particularly positive or not so positive in educational settings. Regarding this, consider

whether these recollected experiences may cause concerns that you wish to communicate to Leo beforehand, in order to have extra support in place. The best way to test this is to choose beforehand what examples you would like to share during the interview and as you produce these to check your emotional responses to recalling such experiences. It is important that taking part in this research does not affect your emotional, physical, or psychological health in any adverse way

7) Are aware that any disclosure that concerns safeguarding will be dealt by following the 2021 NCG Safeguarding single procedure. If you are not aware of it, please access it and read it at: https://www.ncgrp.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/2021-10-NCG-Safeguarding-Procedure.pdf
8) Are able to spare between 45 minutes to one hour for a semi-structured interview. The format can be adapted to suit your preference and can be done either face-to-face or online via Zoom.
9) Are happy with the interview being recorded. If face-to-face with a mobile device with an audio recording app, or online via Zoom.

If you meet the above criteria and would like to take part, please send me, Leo, an email with an expression of interest at 2508911A@student.gla.ac.uk / Leonardo.Morantes-Africano@ncl-coll.ac.uk. I will then contact you to discuss the themes and questions, send you a consent form for you to sign and return electronically and also to arrange a time, place, and preferred way to conduct the interview. Overall, the interview will start with some background information about you. For example, the pseudonym that you would like me to use during the interview, your gender/sexual orientation, and any other information you would like to share, such as age, and whether you want to focus on your experience during school or college. As a queer teacher educator, I will offer some of my perspectives of the issues discussed and will try to make the semi-structured interview conversational. There is no pressure to discuss anything that you feel uncomfortable sharing.

As outlined above, your personal details will be kept confidential, and during the interviews, the written thesis and any other academic publication, a pseudonym will be used to de-identify you. Your personal data will be destroyed upon the submission of the thesis. However, the research data gathered from interviews will be kept for 10 years to meet University of Glasgow regulations. The material will be retained for use in future publications, dissemination via conference presentations, or academic papers. However, your personal data will not be traceable.

Please note: Participation in this research is entirely voluntary, will have no impact on your studies, and you have the right to withdraw from it without giving a reason. You can also request that your data be removed from the research by contacting me, the researcher, at s2508911A@student.gla.ac.uk. However, as a thesis needs to be produced by 7th July 2024, the deadline to request the removal of your data from the research would be Friday 9th of June 2024. After this date it would be difficult to guarantee the removal of research data, as this compromises my educational process and outcomes for my doctorate in education.

Finally, a statement on confidentiality required by the University Ethics Committee:

> *Please note that confidentiality will be maintained as far as it is possible, unless during our conversation I hear anything which makes me worried that someone might be in danger of*

harm, I might have to inform relevant agencies of this, such as the Safeguarding officer at NCUC.

Please also note that this project has been considered and approved by the College Research Ethics Committee at the University of Glasgow, and the Research Ethics Committee of Newcastle College University Centre.

To pursue any complaint about the conduct of the research: contact the College of Social Sciences Lead for Ethical Review, Dr Benjamin Franks: email socsci-ethics-lead@glasgow.ac.uk.

Thanks again,

Leo

_____End of Participant Information Sheet_____

University of Glasgow

College of Social Sciences

Consent Form

Title of Project: **Experiences and perspectives of LGBTQ+ students around belonging in learning environments**

Name of Researcher: Leonardo Morantes-Africano, Newcastle College University Centre

Name of supervisor: Professor Robert Davis, University of Glasgow

Basic consent

I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions. ☐

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason. ☐

I acknowledge that participants will be referred to by pseudonym in all publications ☐

I acknowledge that there will be no effect on my studies or professional relationship with the researcher, arising from my participation or non-participation in this research. ☐

Clauses relating to data usage and storage confirmed by Leo

- All names and other material likely to identify individuals will be de-identified. ☐
- The material will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times. ☐
- The material will be retained in secure storage for potential use in future publications, both print and online. ☐

Refer to Privacy Notice

I acknowledge that I have received a Privacy Notice in relation to this research project. ☐

Consent on method clause

I consent to interviews being audio-recorded. ☐

Consent clause, agreement format

I agree / do not agree (delete as applicable) to take part in the above study.

Name of Participant: …… Signature ……

Date ……

Name of Researcher: Leo Morantes-Africano Signature lamorantesa

Date:

…… End of consent form ……

University of Glasgow

College of Social Sciences

PRIVACY NOTICE

Privacy Notice for Participation in Research Project: Experiences and perspectives of LGBTQ+ students around belonging in learning environments

Your Personal Data

The University of Glasgow will be what's known as the 'Data Controller' of your personal data processed in relation to your participation in the research project '*responses and strategies used by college higher education teachers to transition to online education during Covid-19*'. This privacy notice will explain how The University of Glasgow will process your personal data.

Why we need it

We are collecting basic personal data such as your name and contact details in order to conduct our research. We need your name and contact details to arrange interviews and to potentially follow up on the data you have provided.

We only collect data that we need for the research project and your personal information will be de-identified, meaning that a pseudonym will be used in the write up of the research report.

Please note that full confidentiality may be impossible to guarantee due to the size of the participant group and location. Please see accompanying **Participant Information Sheet**, and discuss with the researcher, Leo Morantes-Africano, any concerns before signing up to be interviewed. He can be contacted via email at s2508911a@student.glasgow.ac.uk, leonardo.morantes-africano@ncl-coll.ac.uk, or by phone at 0191 200 4262.

Legal basis for processing your data

We must have a legal basis for processing all personal data. As this processing is for Academic Research we will be relying upon **Task in the Public Interest** in order to process the basic personal data that you provide. For any special categories data collected we will be processing this on the basis that it is **necessary for archiving purposes, scientific or historical research purposes or statistical purposes**

Alongside this, in order to fulfil our ethical obligations, we will ask for your **Consent** to take part in the study. Please see accompanying **Consent Form**.

What we do with it and who we share it with

All the personal data you submit is processed by the main researcher: Leonardo Morantes-Africano, and his supervisor Prof. Robert Davis. In addition, security measures are in place to ensure that your personal data remains safe: for example, pseudonymisation, secure storage of digital files in the University of Glasgow's servers, all files will be password-protected and all files and devices used for the interview will be encrypted. Please consult the **Consent form** and **Participant Information Sheet** which accompanies this notice.

Possible further use of data: Due to the nature of this research it is very likely that other researchers may find the data collected to be useful in answering future research questions. We will ask for your explicit consent for your data to be shared in this way.

You will receive information on research outcomes via email, with a copy of the study findings and details of any subsequent conference presentations, publications or outputs on request.

What are your rights?
GDPR provides that individuals have certain rights including: to request access to, copies of and rectification or erasure of personal data and to object to processing. In addition, data subjects may also have the right to restrict the processing of the personal data and to data portability. You can request access to the information we process about you at any time.

If at any point you believe that the information we process relating to you is incorrect, you can request to see this information and may in some instances request to have it restricted, corrected, or erased. You may also have the right to object to the processing of data and the right to data portability.

Please note that as we are processing your personal data for research purposes, the ability to exercise these rights may vary as there are potentially applicable research exemptions under the GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018. For more information on these exemptions, please see UofG Research with personal and special categories of data.

If you wish to exercise any of these rights, please submit your request via the webform or contact dp@gla.ac.uk

Complaints
If you wish to raise a complaint on how we have handled your personal data, you can contact the University Data Protection Officer who will investigate the matter.
Our Data Protection Officer can be contacted at dataprotectionofficer@glasgow.ac.uk

If you are not satisfied with our response or believe we are not processing your personal data in accordance with the law, you can complain to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) https://ico.org.uk/

Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved via the College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee or relevant School Ethics Forum in the College.

How long do we keep it for?

Your **personal** data will be retained by the University only for as long as is necessary for processing and no longer than the period of ethical approval (3rd March 2023). After this time, personal data will be securely deleted.

Your **research** data will be retained for a period of ten years in line with the University of Glasgow Guidelines. Specific details in relation to research data storage are provided on the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form which accompany this notice.

End of Privacy Notice _____

University of Glasgow

College of Social Sciences

Doctorate in Education dissertation: **Experiences and perspectives of LGBTQ+ students around belonging in learning environments**

Postgraduate researcher: Mr. Leonardo Morantes-Africano, GUID 2508911a

Indicative themes and questions

These will be the main guiding questions to be used during the semi-structured interviews

1. Contextual information: your name will be de-identified in the interview transcript and all publication. What name would you like to me to use for this?
2. What is your gender identity and/or sexual orientation?
3. The project is about belonging, what do you understand by this?
4. What would you like to talk about first? Is there anything specific you would like to share with me? Or do you want me to ask you some questions I prepared (if the latter, see below)
5. Do you feel that being from a gender/sexual minority has made an impact on your educational experience?
6. Can you think of examples to illustrate?
7. This project has a futures orientation, and aims to inform initial and continuous teacher education. Is there anything you would like your teachers to know about gender/sexual minorities?
8. Or, what would you advice teachers to do to make LGBTQ+ students feel that they are valued, accepted and supported in educational settings?
9. Out of curiosity, what motivated you to take part in this conversation?
10. Any final thoughts?

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