A Narrative Inquiry into the Lived Experiences of a Transgender Teenager in Education and Beyond

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Access Condition and Agreement

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Introduction and Overview

This thesis study explores the storied experiences of a transgender teenager within a UK secondary school and their wider life. This exploration is underpinned by a social constructionist epistemological position and seeks to understand and account for how concepts of identity, power, and belonging interact and intersect and to what extent this may promote or hinder positive experiences. This thesis has been written and organised into three sections: Chapter 1: Literature Review; Chapter 2: Empirical Paper; and Chapter 3: Reflective Chapter.

The literature review in Chapter 1 explores the existing body of research on the experiences of LGBTQ+ young people within secondary schools in the United Kingdom. Specifically, this review seeks to understand the extent to which LGBTQ+ students are supported in the school environment, the barriers they may face, the various policies and practices that contribute to a more inclusive school culture, and the influence of wider social factors on their inclusion. As part of this, there is an exploration of how more cisnormative and essentialist understandings of identity development, the belief that everyone innately identifies with their gender assigned at birth and that this is fixed, juxtapose with exponents of the right to gender self-identification. Through the exploration of a range of existing literature, including pertinent systemic policies, the review provides an overview of the current picture of LGBTQ+ inclusion, seeking to highlight gaps in the existing knowledge, and identify areas where further research is necessary.

Chapter 2 presents an empirical paper which details the qualitative research study undertaken. This study uses a narrative inquiry methodology to gain a rich and nuanced understanding of the embodied and relational dimensions of school life for one transgender young person. This was done primarily through a series of semi-structured interviews conducted in person, with additional data sources including field journals also forming part of the narrative inquiry. The adoption of a single participant case study approach helps guides the study through a research puzzle which is

conceptualised around how the young person in the study stories their experiences within the context of their school setting, and how these stories illuminate a greater understanding of how power, identity development and belonging are experienced. The study also uses the new materialist framework of assemblage theory to understand how the stories of a transgender teenager are influenced by different entanglements of human, non-human, and material relations. Three key narrative threads were identified, with findings highlighting implications and reflective questions for educational psychology practice and others conducting work and research with young people from marginalised demographics.

Chapter 3 consists of a reflective chapter, whereby the researcher describes aspects of the research process. There is discussion of the initial and continuing motivations for undertaking this study, with consideration given to the impact that exploring the storied narratives of a trans young person can have in providing them with an increased sense of agency over their own lived experiences. Further reflections focus on the emotional impact for the researcher on completing this research. Lastly, consideration has been given to how dissemination of the study's findings can be effectively achieved.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to explore the existing body of research on the experiences, particularly linked to the theme of inclusion, of LGBTQ+ young people within secondary schools in the United Kingdom. Specifically, this review seeks to understand the extent to which LGBTQ+ students are supported in the school environment, the barriers they may face, the various policies and practices that contribute to a more inclusive school culture, and the influence of wider social factors on their inclusion. Through the exploration of a range of existing literature, including pertinent systemic policies, this review will provide an overview of the current picture of LGBTQ+ inclusion, seeking to highlight gaps in the existing knowledge, and identify areas where further research is necessary.

Exponentially increasing numbers of young people are identifying as part of the LGBTQ+ community (Office for National Statistics, 2023). This has led to wider cultural debate about support for these young people, from school policy and curriculum to health services, also becoming more prevalent and in many cases more divisive. The relevance of LGBTQ+ inclusion in secondary schools is therefore of paramount importance, given the significant impact that school environments have on young people's mental health, well-being, and academic achievement. As settings where children and young people spend a significant proportion of their time, schools can play an integral role in fostering supportive, inclusive environments which can allow LGBTQ+ young people to develop positively as individuals (Leonard, 2022; Brett and Brassington, 2023). However, due to a range of systemic factors, ranging from overt discrimination to more subtle, but no less significant, barriers caused by the current paradigms of hetero- and cis-normativity, schools have also been frequently cited as a significant risk factor regarding the emotional and physical wellbeing of LGBTQ+ pupils (McDermott et al., 2024). There has been progression in support for LGBTQ+ pupils within UK schools since the period from 1988 to 2003 when such support was effectively banned under the Section 28 legislation. Yet young people from sexual and gender minorities are still frequently experiencing instances of stigma, prejudice and abuse (Schlief et al., 2023), isolation across different domains of their school settings

(Harris et al., 2021) and often struggle to trust teachers to effectively support them (Rafter et al., 2024). Research has shown that teachers themselves often lack confidence in supporting LGBTQ+ pupils due to a combination of insufficient training or guidance from school leadership. Within these contexts, any work which can effectively promote and imbed meaningful and sustainable inclusive practices for LGBTQ+ pupils is increasingly vital. Therefore, one key aspect of this review is seeking to understand what attempts to support LGBTQ+ inclusion in schools may currently look like, and how young people have experienced these attempts. It is hoped that this can guide the research focus of the wider study of which this literature review forms part, in exploring the experiences of LGBTQ+ pupils at UK secondary schools who have adopted a more targeted 'whole school' approach to promoting inclusion for this demographic.

As mentioned, LGBTQ+ students often face unique challenges, such as bullying, discrimination, and social isolation, which can hinder their ability to thrive in educational settings. Despite the UK government taking some strides in promoting LGBTQ+ rights and attempted to foster more inclusive environments there remains considerable variation in how different schools approach inclusion, with some providing robust support systems and others failing to address LGBTQ+ students' needs adequately. Understanding the existing research on these issues is critical for informing policies and practices, including within the field of Educational Psychology, that promote equality, safety, and respect for LGBTQ+ young people in schools.

This literature review will be narrative in nature to complement the narrative inquiry research methodology used within the wider study of which it forms a part. Unlike systematic literature reviews or meta-analyses, which have strict inclusion criteria and aim for objective, quantitative analysis, a narrative literature review can offer a more flexible, less exhaustive, qualitative approach. The primary goal of a narrative literature review is to provide a rich, nuanced understanding of the research landscape by synthesising various perspectives and interpretations from multiple sources. Being narrative in nature, this review seeks to present a broad, interpretive overview of the key themes, trends, and discussions around the phenomenon of LGBTQ+ inclusion, while also highlighting gaps in knowledge and areas for future research (Baumeister & Leary, 1997).

The ontological stance of both a narrative literature review and narrative inquiry aligns with constructivism, which suggests that reality is socially constructed and subjective. In the case of a narrative literature review, this perspective acknowledges that the stories, interpretations, and frameworks found in the literature reflect different perceptions of reality. Similarly, narrative inquiry assumes that individuals construct and interpret their own realities through the stories they tell about their lives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Thus, both approaches reject objective, fixed realities in favour of a more fluid, individualised understanding of the world.

Both narrative literature reviews and narrative inquiry adopt an interpretivist epistemology, emphasising the importance of understanding human experiences and knowledge from the perspective of the participants. This narrative literature review will focus on the interpretation of the existing literature through the lens of the researcher. Narrative inquiry, as will be drawn upon in the empirical chapter, seeks to understand meaning through the participants' own interpretations of their experiences and how these are co-constructed with the researcher. In both approaches, knowledge is viewed as constructed, context-dependent, and shaped by the perspectives of those involved in the research process.

A narrative literature review complements narrative inquiry methodology by providing a contextual foundation for the research. While a narrative literature review brings together existing research and theoretical frameworks, narrative inquiry focuses on capturing individual experiences through storytelling. The two can be integrated to provide a rich, layered understanding of a research puzzle. The review can reveal existing theoretical perspectives on narrative and human experience, which can inform the design of a narrative inquiry study.

As part of this, it will be guided by Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) 'three-dimensional research space'. This is an overarching model with roots in narrative inquiry methodology which will provide a guide for the whole of the current research project and will be drawn upon further in the empirical chapter. However, in relation to the literature review, it possesses three key areas: 'Continuity', which refers to the understanding of experiences over time in the past, present and future; 'Interaction',

which involves exploring personal and social relationships; and 'Situation', which explores the physical environments in which experiences occur. In the context of this literature review, these three dimensions will be used to guide the review in the following ways:

Continuity: how have the experiences of LGBTQ+ pupils, including around inclusion, been experienced over time? How may these have been impacted by changes in policies and broader societal attitudes, and how have these potentially informed experiences in the present compared to the past? What might this mean for the future of LGBTQ+ inclusion in UK secondary schools?

Interaction: how have differing attitudes, for example those of teachers or other pupils, informed the experiences of LGBTQ+ pupils? What types of relationships may be important in understanding how LGBTQ+ young people experience a sense of inclusion at school?

Situation: how does the physical and emotional environment inform the experiences of LGBTQ+ pupils? This includes possible school initiatives to support inclusion, how pupils' personal spaces may or may not be respected, and to what extent wider school culture contributes to experiences of inclusion.

By integrating these three dimensions into this narrative literature review, the hope is to produce a more nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding LGBTQ+ inclusion in UK secondary schools, focusing not just on isolated events or policies, but on the broader context of time, relationships, and environments that shape LGBTQ+ students' experiences.

Approach to Review

The scope of this review is research which focuses on LGBTQ+ young people, their experiences of their education settings, factors which are suggested to promote or inhibit their inclusion, and the impact of these on the children and young people themselves. The review is divided into four sections. Section one details key

terminology and the predominant theoretical frameworks which guide the review, including theoretical constructions of 'inclusion'. Section two details the legislative and social contexts impacting LGBTQ+ pupils in UK schools and wider society from the 1950s to the present day. Section three critically discusses attempts to develop inclusion for LGBTQ pupils within UK secondary schools, both at individual and systemic levels, why this is important, and some of the impact of thee attempts. Section four then discusses opportunities for future research, including how a narrative inquiry methodology may be well suited for gaining a deeper understanding of LGBTQ+ students' experiences of inclusion.

Searches were carried out across a range of electronic databases including ERIC, MedLine, PsycINFO, British Education Index and Scopus. To ensure coverage of UK-specific material, additional searches were performed using Google Scholar, Stonewall's research archive, and the UK Government publication repositories. Search terms were combined using Boolean operators, truncation, and phrase searching. The final search string (adapted as necessary for each database) was:

("LGBT" OR "LGBTQ" OR "lesbian" OR "gay" OR "bisexual" OR "transgender" OR "queer" OR "sexual minority" OR "gender diverse" OR "non-binary")
AND ("school" OR "education" OR "secondary school" OR "primary school" OR "pupil" OR "student")
AND ("inclusion" OR "inclusive education" OR "belonging" OR "school climate" OR "discrimination" OR "bullying" OR "support")
AND ("United Kingdom" OR "UK" OR "England" OR "Scotland" OR "Wales" OR "Northern Ireland").

Backward and forward citation tracking was used to identify additional relevant publications not captured in the initial search. Reference lists of key papers were also screened to locate further literature. A table of inclusion and exclusion criteria can be found below:

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Population	Studies focusing on LGBTQ-identifying pupils or students in UK primary or secondary education.	Studies focusing exclusively on higher education students.
Geographical location	Research conducted within the UK or involving UK participants.	Studies based solely in non-UK contexts without clear relevance to the UK educational system.
Focus	Empirical or theoretical studies addressing experiences of inclusion, belonging, discrimination, or support for LGBTQ pupils.	Studies focused solely on curriculum content, teacher training, or policy without reference to pupil experience.
Publication date	Publications from 2003 onwards, reflecting contemporary understandings of LGBTQ inclusion in UK schools following the repeal of Section 28.	Studies published before 2003 unless historically significant.
Language	English-language publications.	Non-English-language publications.
Publication type	Peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, doctoral theses, policy reports, and grey literature from reputable organisations (e.g., Stonewall, Equality and	Non-academic or anecdotal materials lacking methodological transparency or institutional credibility.

	Human Rights Commission, Ofsted).	

Given the evolving and socially embedded nature of LGBTQ inclusion in education, this review deliberately incorporated grey literature and non–peer-reviewed sources. Reports, policy documents, and research outputs from organisations such as Stonewall, LGBT Youth Scotland, and the Department for Education provide valuable, often contemporaneous, insights into pupils' lived experiences and institutional practices. These sources were included where they demonstrated methodological rigour (e.g., transparent data collection methods or large-scale survey design) and substantive relevance to the research question. Given the relative paucity of research into the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ pupils in schools, along with the framing of this study as being part of an Educational Psychology doctorate course, research was also included from practitioner psychologists including those from unpublished doctoral theses.

Including grey literature was particularly important for three reasons. First, the limited volume of peer-reviewed research focusing specifically on UK LGBTQ pupils necessitated broadening the evidence base to reflect a fuller picture of the field. Second, policy and advocacy reports often influence educational practice directly and thus form an integral part of the socio-educational context in which inclusion is enacted. Third, narrative and participatory studies published outside traditional academic channels often capture marginalised voices that may be underrepresented in peer-reviewed literature.

Key terminology

While some other terminology important to this literature review will be discussed in more detail in subsequent sections, for example 'inclusion', there are other examples of terminology which are relatively unique to the demographics being

considered and the ways in which their inclusion has been conceptualised and supported.

Throughout the review the acronym *LGBTQ+* is used to represent identities which can be categorised as being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer. In this instance, the '+' refers to other identities which some can view as being part of this wider umbrella, for example intersex or asexual individuals. The term trans has also been chosen in this review as an umbrella term which encompasses binary transgender individuals, non-binary people, and those who identify as gender non-conforming, gender fluid, agender, or gender queer.

Cisnormativity refers to the societal assumption and preference that all individuals are cisgender, meaning their gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth. It is the position of this literature review that this framework reinforces the idea that being cisgender is the "normal" or "default" state, often marginalising or invalidating trans identities.

Heteronormativity refers to the cultural belief or expectation that heterosexuality is the only natural or normal sexual orientation. It presumes that all people are or should be attracted to individuals of the opposite sex, often disregarding or stigmatising other sexual orientations like homosexuality, bisexuality, or asexuality.

Sex commonly refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that distinguish different categories of humans (traditionally 'male' and 'female'). This includes elements such as chromosomes, hormone levels, internal reproductive organs, and external genitalia (European Institute of Gender Equality, n.d.). While biological essentialist views maintain that sex differences are innate, fixed and rooted in biology some scholars argue that the categories of sex are socially constructed in terms of how they are defined, used and regulated (Rival, et al., 2005). Given the social constructionist perspective of this study, a working definition of sex will be adopted which views sex as referring to bodies and biological attributes which are socially categorised and given meaning in specific cultural and institutional contexts. It is felt that such a definition respects the lived realities of different body types while acknowledging that categorisation is socially constructed.

Gender refers to the social, cultural and psychological attributes, roles, behaviours, identities and expectations that societies attach to people based on perceived or assigned sex (Council of Europe, n.d.). This study adopts a perspective that gender refers to the socially and culturally constructed perspectives around different roles, behaviours and characteristics which vary across cultures and time and how it is shaped by institutions, practices and power relations. This definition stresses that gender is not simply a natural by-product of biological sex, but a socially mediated category (Kaufman et al., 2023). The justification for using this working definition is that as a study which adopts a social constructionist position, it is therefore concerned with drawing attention to how gender is produced, maintained, and contestable, rather than assumed as fixed, binary or natural.

Sexuality is a concept that encompasses sexual feelings, desires, attractions, behaviours and identities, including sexual orientation, along with cultural meanings, practices and relationships pertaining to sex and intimacy (University of Edinburgh, 2024). Some essentialist perspectives maintain that sexuality is innate and fixed, for example being 'born gay' or 'born straight', while other views posit that sexuality is shaped by culture, institutions, power relations, discourse and social practices. The working definition adopted for the benefit of the current study is that sexuality refers to the socially and culturally embedded ways in which people experience, express, understand and negotiate sexual desire, attraction, intimacy, identity and behaviour. In understanding these aspects, it is also important to acknowledge the influence of particular historical, institutional and relational contexts.

Because research is shaped by the positionality of the researcher, adopting the working definitions above helps the study to make more explicit its view of the constructed nature of these categories and helps to avoid re-producing essentialising assumptions. It also enables sensitivity to variation across contexts, for example culture, time, institutions, and to power relations, all of which are important considerations as part of the narrative inquiry methodology and the broader theoretical perspectives discussed in the subsequent section.

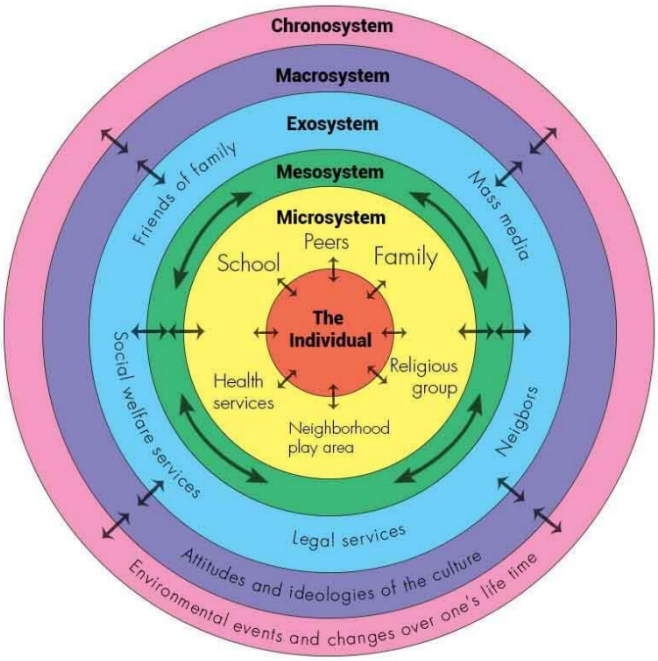
Theoretical Framework Guiding Review

Ecological Systems Theory

This literature review is guided by Bronfenbrenner's (1994) Ecological Systems Theory (EST) which places the experiences of LGBTQ+ pupils not in an isolated vacuum but as part of a wider and interconnected systemic model. A visual representation of the EST model can be seen in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

Bronfenbrenner's (1994) Ecological Systems Theory



As a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP), the influence of Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecosystemic model is prominent as it provides both trainee and experienced Educational Psychologists (EPs) with a framework to better understand the needs of a child or young person in relation to the systems operating around them.

At the centre of this model is the individual, with acknowledgement given to the biological and personal characteristics which may influence their development. In the

case of LGBTQ+ children and young people, hormonal development and the onset and progression of puberty can act as an impetus for initial or increased exploration of gender diversity, often to reduce the feelings of gender dysphoria which physiological changes associated with puberty can bring. The biological aspect of Bronfenbrenner's model also provides space to consider the personal characteristics, for example levels of resilience, which for LGBTQ+ can often be an important consideration.

At a microsystemic level are the relationships which the child or young person has in their life, for example with family members, at school, or with other professionals supporting them. Positive relationships at this level can be integral for positive identity development in LGBTQ children and young people (Katz-Wise et al., 2017). Interactions between these relationships, for example how a school works with the parents of an LGBTQ+ child or young person to best meet their needs, fall within the mesosystemic level of the model. At the exosystemic level exist links between different settings, ones with which the child or young person may not have direct contact with, but which nonetheless have some potential influence on their development, for example how local authority policy impacts the curriculum delivered for LGBTQ+ pupils. For LGBTQ+ children and young people, the wider social context of the macrosystem, along with the role of time and socio-historical context at the chronosystem, are also integral in understanding their development and what support is afforded to them to ensure an inclusive education experience and this will be explored in a further section.

Feminist post-structuralism

The application of the Ecological Systems Theory is also informed by feminist post-structuralism. As discussed by Rafter and Lee (2022) who adopt this theoretical framework in their study examining social work student interventions with LGBTQ+ young people in secondary schools, schools are historically spaces which regularly uphold heteronormative and cisnormative views relating to identity. This has also been the conclusion of more recent studies such as Horton (2022) which found that such views are resulting in the normalisation of educational injustices, particularly for trans young people. As a researcher who is trans and queer, feminist post-structuralism is a

stance that I, and subsequently this review, elects to adopt as it inherently seeks to challenge the dominant binary categories of identity relating to both gender and sexuality.

As discussed by Davies and Gannon (2005), these categories are often mapped onto other classifications, many of which are coded with an element of moral judgement, for example normal/abnormal or rational/irrational. These judgements can be seen to be used by those in power to construct and maintain ideas of normalcy and naturalness, thus marking those not falling within these boundaries as being 'other'. They are an example of the external systems in Bronfenbrenner's model imparting restrictive influence over the central individual. As this research is examining LGBTQ+ inclusion in schools, a major, organised power structure in the lives of children and young people, it seems beneficial to be guided by a theoretical framework which not only examines how systems of power work in the lives of individuals and groups, but also how that power makes certain ways of being appear more desirable (Davies and Gannon, 2005). This feels particularly pertinent when considered as part of discussions around assimilationist models of inclusion for LGBTQ+ children and young people, versus a more emancipatory model of inclusion as discussed by Horton and Carlile (2022).

In adopting this systematic, post-structuralist approach to understanding the experiences of LGBTQ+ pupils in their school environments, also found in Xu and Roegman's (2023) systematic review of protective factors for trans and gender non-conforming young people at high school, this review is also engaging in the practice of what Xu and Roegman (2023) denote as queering the school climate. In its use as a verb, 'queer' can denote an instance of doing something differently or which disrupts a normative understanding of something. Linville (2011) has discussed how previous research into the experiences of LGBTQ+ young people has overly focused on interactions at a microsystemic level. Therefore, by adopting an approach to reviewing existing literature which queers the focus of research into LGBTQ+ pupil experience, that is, examining literature using a systemic theoretical model and placing literature within the three-dimensional research space, this review can consider the dynamic

ways systems interact around young people who themselves are queering normalised understandings of sexuality and gender.

Queer Theory

In elaboration of the above discussion of queering both the research focus and those who are queering normative understandings of sexuality and gender, it is important to expand further on queer theory and the way it is also influencing the current review.

As discussed by Ben Hagai and Zurbriggen (2022), queer theoretical perspectives commonly engage in critiques of more humanist perspectives of how individual selves develop and progress. They cast a critical lens on empirical methodologies which might claim to represent fixed realities or experiences. Similarly, and in common with feminist post-structuralism, they also challenge notions that identity categories are stable or unitary, or which place emphasis on certain identity displays being in some way more authentic.

In these ways, queer theory interacts well with aspects of Ecological Systems Theory. Both reject a focus on the individual as it ignores the impact of wider sociocultural and systemic factors and thus misses the important contribution in queer history of collective support in overcoming broader oppressive factors. This aligns with the importance EST places on examining phenomena at different system levels. In the context of this review and wider study, this includes understanding how the wider context of the school system – the 'Situation' in Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional research space - has contributed, in whatever form, to how queer identities have developed and experienced their inclusion.

Queer theory is also a beneficial perspective for the narrative methodology employed by both this review and the current research study. The narrative approach also seeks to build an understanding of the stories and experiences of people over time – their 'Continuity' - and does not claim that these experiences are necessarily the reality of others. Nor does it posit that the experiences and stories brought to light are

representative of wider demographics, even if they share similar identities. It could be argued that queer theorists often engage in further research and discursive practices which have commonalities with the three-dimensional research space of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This is because they regularly move 'inwards' to explore individual feelings, reactions, etc. but also move 'outwards' to understand broader social factors. Additionally, the incorporation of time – the past, present and future relating to the story – is important in gaining a deeper understanding of queer perspectives. This is particularly the case in queer theory when seeking to understand aspects such as key historical moments. For example, activism during the AIDS epidemic (Ben Hagai & Zurbriggen, 2022), how someone's queer identity or experience may be informed by this at the time of any discussion which forms part of current research, and how their story thus far contributes to work which explores their imagined queer utopias or, more specific to the focus of the current review, what 'ideal' ideas of inclusion may look like for LGBTQ+ young people (Dowle, 2024).

Cis-normative vs self-identification theories

Traditional theories of adolescent identity development, such as Kohlberg's Cognitive Developmental Theory of Gender (Kohlberg, 1966) and Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), have been important in understanding how young people form a sense of self. However, these models have been increasingly critiqued for their cis-normative assumptions, which implicitly position a cisgender identity as the normative endpoint of development (Eliason, 2014; Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018).

Kohlberg's stage-based approach suggests that children progress through cognitive stages culminating in a 'mature' understanding of gender as stable and immutable (Kohlberg, 1966). This developmental endpoint reflects binary and essentialist notions of gender, assuming that a person's gender identity naturally corresponds to their biological sex. Similarly, Social Identity Theory posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from group membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), but has often viewed groupings by gender in strictly binary and cisnormative

ways, overlooking transgender, nonbinary, and gender-fluid identities (Hyde, Bigler, Joel, Tate, & van Anders, 2019).

By contrast, self-identification frameworks, influenced by the queer theory and feminist poststructuralism perspectives discussed above, view identity as fluid, dynamic and socially constructed, rather than biologically determined (Butler, 1990; Serano, 2007). These approaches foreground an individual's lived experiences and personal narratives of gender development, placing emphasis on agency and social recognition (Olson et al., 2015; Pyne, 2016).

Within this broader debate, gender critical and essentialist perspectives represent theoretical positions that maintain biological or immutable understandings of sex and gender. From an essentialist standpoint, gender identity is seen as a reflection of a person's biological sex rather than a product of self-determination or sociocultural context. Similarly, proponents of gender critical perspectives argue that while gender may be a social construct it is grounded in biological sex, and express concern that the concept of self-identification undermines women's sex-based rights (Stock, 2021; Jeffreys, 2014).

In contrast, advocates of self-identification perspectives argue that it is the primary way by which we should understand how someone identifies in terms of gender (Coburn et al., 2025), advocating for understandings of gender development which account for its fluidity, plurality and dynamic nature. Such frameworks highlight that adolescent identity development cannot be adequately explained by theories that exclude or marginalise trans and nonbinary experiences. Instead, those who hold self-identification perspectives advocate for inclusive and affirming theoretical approaches which provide a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse trajectories of gender development in adolescence.

Theories of Inclusion

Inclusion, in the context of education, is the practice of educating students with diverse needs and backgrounds, with the aim to provide equitable access to education and promote social participation for all students. This includes those with disabilities, linguistic differences, or varying academic abilities. According to the Salamanca Statement (1994), inclusion in education refers to the "inclusion of children with disabilities into regular schools," but over time, the definition has expanded to encompass broader categories of diversity. The more recent definition from Booth (2005) that inclusion is an attempt to put values concerned with equity, participation, respect for diversity, community, rights, compassion, and sustainability seems to align more with the EST theoretical perspective of this literature review that inclusion is not merely about the individual but should form part of wider systemic considerations. This is echoed in some of the foundational perspectives on inclusion and inclusive education, particularly those which frame inclusive education as an aspect of social justice, and which sought to disrupt the paradigms of the time in which they were written. For example, Paulo Freire's 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' (1970) advocated for the presence of educational practices which challenge societal inequalities. Similarly, bell hooks' 'Teaching to Transgress' (1994) emphasised the role of education in challenging a range of social inequalities, with hooks recognising the need to create environments for students where their identities were respected and valued.

The Index for Inclusion

In a framework which can be seen to retain many of the ideas of Friere and hooks, Booth and Ainscow (2002) developed their 'Index for Inclusion' which sought to provide school leaders with a toolkit to effectively establish and review a range of inclusive practices within their setting. The key tenets of the original Index for Inclusion were the need to build inclusive cultures within a school; create inclusive policies; develop inclusive practices; and promote engagement and participation. Updated editions (Booth and Ainscow, 2006; 2011) have built upon the original framework as understanding of inclusion has developed and evolved. This has included broadening

the scope of the Index to address broader societal issues such as poverty and discrimination, along with consideration of more global perspectives. There is also a greater emphasis on critical reflection of school inclusion policies and practices, including ongoing professional development for staff; more collaboration between stakeholders in achieving an inclusive school environment; and an increased focus on leadership in fostering and embedding inclusive values and practices. These updates reflect other theoretical frameworks guiding this literature review, particularly EST and the broader narrative inquiry methodology. It is important to retain an understanding that inclusion does not exist in isolation and should consider wider systemic factors, changes over time, and that effective inclusion is an evolving, fluid process which requires updating as part of continual reflective approaches.

Inclusion for LGBTQ+ pupils

Despite previous literature which positioned inclusion as an issue of social justice and equality, a focus on inclusion for LGBTQ+ pupils is a relatively recent development. To understand why, it is important to consider the broader societal and governmental policy challenges, and changes, which have historically contributed to varying levels of marginalisation of this demographic over recent decades.

Legislative and social contexts impacting LGBTQ+ pupils in UK schools and wider society from the 1950s to the present day

Decriminalisation of homosexuality, the continuing fight for equality and Section 28.

The Wolfenden Report of 1957 and its recommendation that homosexual behaviour between consenting adults in private should no longer be a criminal offence (Dryden, n.d.) was the precursor to the Sexual Offences Act 1967 which for the first time partially decriminalised consenting same-sex acts for males over the age of 21. Despite this progression, LGBTQ+ people continued to feel that their identities were ones which were suppressed to varying degrees by institutions within the United Kingdom, and groups such as the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) sought to raise awareness of LGBTQ+ rights throughout the decade of the 1970s (Dryden, n.d.) As discussed by White et al. (n.d.) the small progressions in equality for LGBTQ+ people following the Sexual Offences Act 1967 stalled and, it could be argued, went backwards in the United Kingdom during the 1980s and 1990s. One contributing factor to this was the AIDS crisis which, while impacting multiple demographics and marginalised communities, became synonymous with the gay community and resulted in increased stigma towards gay men and the LGBTQ+ community more broadly. This can be seen in research by Clements and Field (2014; cited in White et al., n.d.) which found that homophobia in the United Kingdom appeared to peak towards the latter half of the 1980s with three-quarters of people in the United Kingdom holding the view that same-sex acts were wrong.

Against this apparently overt level of homophobic attitudes within the United Kingdom it is perhaps unsurprising that the end of the 1980s also saw the production of a piece of legislation which would have a direct and, in some cases, lasting impact on the education of LGBTQ+ children and young people. Section 28 was a piece of legislation introduced in 1988 by the then Margaret Thatcher led Conservative government in response to what Walker and Bates (2015) discuss as having been the fears regarding the promotion of homosexuality within schools and other local authority services in the United Kingdom. Section 28 sought to prevent schools from engaging in

what it deemed to be the "promotion" of homosexuality as a form of acceptable family relationship and withheld funding for any educational materials which were seen to enable this promotion (Dryden, n.d.) While White et al. (2018) note that in practical terms the legislation had little in the way of "legal clout" on account of its relatively ambiguous terminology, the practical implications for teaching staff and the impact on education provision for LGBTQ+ young people was tangible. Teaching staff developed a fear around straying onto the wrong side of a perceived legal boundary which led to discussion of LGBTQ+ issues and topics being "actively avoided" (Walker and Bates, 2015). This avoidance can be seen as a contributing factor to the "systemic silencing of homosexual themes or topics within the curriculum" (White et al., 2018, p.4). It exacerbated a curriculum already impacted by heteronormative and cisgendered cultural norms and is an example of the impact on not only what LGBTQ+ children and young people are taught but also their teachers' perceptions of these topics and their ability to effectively challenge these norms (Harris et al., 2021).

Repeal of Section 28, the Equality Act (2010), and other legislative progression

While it was repealed in 2003, it seems that the residual impact of Section 28 on the education of LGBTQ+ children and young people has remained, both in terms of effective resource provision and in teacher perception. In their study into school library provision for LGBTQ+ pupils, Walker and Bates (2015) found that pupils who attended secondary schools in the United Kingdom in the ten-year period following the repeal of Section 28 described a theme of "invisibility of LGBTQ issues" within their school library and that this appeared to contribute to an overall fear of requesting LGBTQ+ resources or accessing the resources which were present. The negative impact which the absence of adequate resources had, even after several years of Section 28's repeal, can be observed further when some pupils in the study state that "having a school library that acknowledged LGBT would have been so precious to me as a kid" (Walker and Bates, 2015, p.275). Given that effective school libraries should be providing resources which aid the educational, emotional and cultural needs of the pupils for whom they serve (CILIP, 2011; cited in Walker and Bates, 2015) the absence of positive

representation and resources within school libraries so long after the repeal of Section 28 can be seen as negative for LGBTQ+ children and young people.

The legacy of Section 28 legislation also appears to have negatively impacted those teaching LGBTQ+ children and young people. Lee (2019) found that those teachers who identify as "LGBT+" and who taught during the period of Section 28 appear much more affected by it than LGBTQ+ colleagues who did not teach while the legislation was in effect. The study found that teaching under Section 28 legislation has left a legacy of caution, self-censorship and complex identity management which appears to exist even at the time of the study sixteen years after the legislation was repealed (Lee, 2019). It also reports that teachers from the Section 28 era are still less likely to be open about their sexuality at school, with some reporting their frustration at not being able to be a positive role model to LGBTQ+ pupils. It therefore appears that despite it not being in effect for many years, Section 28 legislation is still impacting the ability of teachers to contribute fully to the education system within which LGBTQ+ children and young people exist. It is helpful to view the way in which Section 28 impacted the education of LGBTQ+ children and young people through the prism of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. LGBTQ+ children and young people are individuals with developing identities related to their sexuality and gender identity, but these are not occurring in isolation but instead within the microsystem of their school, family, etc. These systems then interact at a mesosystemic level, with links between settings seen at an exosystemic level. For example, how local authority policy impacts the curriculum schools deliver for LGBTQ+ pupils. As previously noted, the wider social and cultural contexts of the macrosystem also impacts LGBTQ+ education provision, with the chronosystem of Bronfenbrenner's model accounting for the role of time and socio-historical context.

Despite the residual negative impact of previous legislation for LGBTQ+ children and young people, there have been some progressive changes in policy which appear to have resulted in positive outcomes for some LGBTQ+ pupils within their schools. The Equalities Act 2010 marked a relatively major shift from the attitudes of preceding decades, with a specific reference to 'protected characteristics' of sexual orientation and gender reassignment meaning that schools and other services were, and are,

expected to adopt reasonable procedural adjustments to promote equality and protect individuals from discrimination (Harris et al., 2022).

In 2019 the Department for Education (DfE) also released updated guidance on the importance of providing information on LGBTQ+ identities and issues as part of the Relationship and Sex Education (RSE) curriculum (Department for Education, 2019) which highlights the importance of LGBTQ+ pupils receiving information and seeing themselves represented as discussed in Walker and Bates' 2015 study. This legislative shift can be seen to be mirrored in other macrosystemic changes in the same decade, such as the Marriage Equality Act 2013, which afforded same-sex couples the same rights to marry as heterosexual couples. More positive media representations of homosexual identities also developed (Lee, 2019), evidencing the broader adoption of progressive attitudes towards Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB) identities in the UK. For LGB pupils, these positive changes do appear to have been reflected within education settings, with White et al. (n.d.) reporting a "distinct lack of homophobia" and an "organisational culture of inclusivity" within the secondary education setting they studied. Similar findings were also reported by Warwick and Aggleton (2014) with regards to the positive attitudes of heterosexual pupils towards LGB identities, Harris et al. (2021) who highlighted positive teacher attitudes towards the creation of an inclusive school culture for LGBTQIA pupils, and the Stonewall School Report 2017 which found a decrease in anti-LGBT bullying and language in UK schools since 2012 (Bradlow et al. 2017). However, the Stonewall School Report also notes that "almost half of all LGBT pupils still face bullying at school" (Bradlow et al., 2017) and that the issue for transgender children and young people appears to be particularly acute.

The 2021 study by Harris et al. also appears to indicate a disparity between the reported teacher views and the reported lived experiences of LGBTQ+ pupils within the same education settings, particular in the case of transgender and non-binary pupils. Harris et al. (2022) also discusses a predominant theme of isolation which emerges from LGBTQ+ pupils in their study, including both the cognitive and social isolation elements discussed by Johnson and Amella (2014), and the links between significant mental health difficulties and identifying as LGBTQ+. In these contexts, it is therefore

important to explore the impact of more contemporary legislation and policy, particularly pertaining to transgender children and young people.

Contemporary guidance and legislation, the Cass Review and ongoing 'culture wars'

As with the Equalities Act 2010, The Gender Recognition Act (GRA) provides a degree of legislative protection for transgender people in the UK, largely around legal recognition of their gender identity once they reach the age of eighteen. The most recent iteration of the GRA was in 2004 when it was updated to reduce the cost associated with the process of legally changing gender. However, as noted by Harris et al. (2022) there persists a culture of divisive debate and challenge in the UK around the GRA and the rights of transgender individuals more broadly to self- identification of their gender, which campaigners posit would reduce the pathologizing of transgender identities. Against this background, the exosystemic difficulties impacting the education of transgender children and young people have become more prominent. In 2015 the local authority in Cornwall became the first in the UK to produce guidance on how schools in their area can, "be at the forefront of making improvements in understanding and supporting pupils that identify as Trans succeed in education" (Cannon and Best, 2015). In 2018 the local authority in Brighton developed similar guidance which it hoped would, "enable our schools to embed the good work they are doing and develop their approach to trans inclusion and support" (Brighton & Hove City Council and Allsorts Youth Project, 2018). Despite these attempts at positive guidance to support the education of transgender children and young people, there was for several years no specific guidance from a governmental level on inclusive practices for transgender pupils. This was despite the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee report on transgender equality noting that support and provision for transgender pupils was uneven across the UK and the Secretary of State for Education admitting that "there are clearly some areas where there is a lot of improvement needed" (House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee, 2016). Hunte (2022) also reported that general guidance for schools which was being produced by the Equality and Human

Rights Commission (EHRC) between 2017 and 2021 had allegedly been scrapped, after what one person cited in the report claims was government intervention, as “they didn’t want it to be too progressive, or too supportive of trans children” (Hunte, 2022).

In summer 2024, the Department for Education did publish draft updated statutory guidance on its RSE curriculum and, as noted by some commentators, while it was published for the purposes of consultation and is therefore not final, it did mark some significant changes in policy (Stone King, 2024). The new guidance introduces more prescriptive age limits on when pupils can be taught about different topics related to relationships and sex education, advises the topic of gender identity to not be taught due to it being “highly contested” (The Education Hub, 2024), instructs schools to share RSE curriculum materials with parents when requested, and requires a greater differentiation between relationship and sex education so that parents are able to make a simpler request for their child to be withdrawn from particular lessons. Many have commented that the guidance risks a return to the prohibitive educational environment which characterized the era of Section 28, although it has also been praised by groups which hold more ‘gender critical’ views and who are more essentialist in their views on sex and gender. However, given that school leaders and teachers have been seeking updated guidance since 2019, the response of the National Education Union (NEU) has not been positive. The NEU has stated that “this Government is failing to support trans workers and trans students. It is regularly stoking up divisions and confusion which directly makes life harder for trans and non-binary students” (National Education Union, 2024). This does not instil a sense of confidence that teachers will feel adequately supported to engage with LGBTQ+ pupils, specifically those who are trans and non-binary, and it is these pupils who will potentially face the brunt of these policies. This is further exacerbated by the ongoing consultation regarding 2023 guidance relating to “gender questioning children” (The Education Hub, 2023) which states that schools have no obligation to support the social transition of pupils, for example adopting new names and pronouns, and schools should inform parents in instances where a pupil makes it known they are questioning their gender identity and wishes to adopt aspects of social transition. These guidelines directly contradict much of the existing research into factors which support the positive wellbeing of trans, non-

binary and gender questioning children (McGowan et al., 2022; Leonard, 2020). It is therefore a further concerning development relating to the education of LGBTQ+ young people and highlights the continued importance of initiatives which seek to promote their positive inclusion in their school communities.

Most recently, additional exosystemic issues impacting trans and non-binary young people have been seen with the release of the Cass Review, an independent report commissioned by the National Health Service (NHS) in 2020 and published in 2024, which has provided recommendations relating to the provision of medical treatment for trans young people within NHS gender services. The main outcome has been the ban on prescribing puberty-pausing medications (often referred to as puberty blockers) to young people under the age of 18, a decision upheld by the new Labour Government in June 2024. The review has generated widespread discussion in newspapers and on television and radio debate programs. The researcher wishes to acknowledge that her own identity informs her positionality that the Cass Review has the potential to be damaging to the health of trans young people in the UK. This is supported by statements from a range of medical professionals, including the British Medical Association (BMA) who called for the review's recommendations to be paused (BMA, 2024) while it reviewed "concerns about weaknesses in the methodologies used in the review". Problems arising from the implementation of some of the recommendations have also been raised by doctors and academics in several countries. Further critique of the Cass Review came from Maung (2024) who cited methodological flaws in the types of data which was included and excluded in the review, including its focus on randomised control trials (RCTs), which Maung argues displays a "serious misunderstanding of the roles and limitations of RCTs compared to other sources of evidence". Other criticisms raised by Maung (2024) include the review's dismissal of the positive evidence around the social transition of trans young people, repeated ambiguity in its use of language and terminology and the positing of claims which are historically inaccurate and "both unverifiable and contradicted by other evidence which is available". The review has also been criticised for its limited consultation with trans young people and the influence on its findings of broader political and ideological agendas, particularly those that seek to limit access to gender-

affirming healthcare for young people. This is a further example of how macrosystemic factors within EST continue to have adverse impacts on the lives of trans young people and contradicts theories of inclusion such as those of bell hooks (1994) which maintain that inclusion should include the respect and valuing of all student identities.

While adults continue to discuss and debate issues relating to the education and healthcare of LGBTQ+ young people, young people themselves continue to seek opportunities to have their voices heard. In some cases, this has led to instances of direct action, with young people from the group Trans Kids Deserve Better staging multi-day 'occupations' at the offices of NHS England and the Department of Education to increase awareness of the issues they are facing (Trans Kids Deserve Better, 2024). This highlights the continued importance of including children and young people in conversations about their own lives and will support the choice of methodology for the current research to develop a rich understanding of the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ young people around how they feel their inclusion has been addressed and supported within their schools. Examples such as the action of Trans Kids Deserve Better also aligns with queer theory perspectives around the importance of understanding and recording instances of activism by queer people against external powers seen as oppressive and how these actions contribute to the positive development of queer identities (Ben Hagai & Zurbriggen, 2022).

Issues impacting LGBTQ+ pupils at school

As already noted, despite progress in macrosystemic factors, for example, societal attitudes towards LGBTQ+ identities, young people within this community continue to face a range of challenges which impact their experiences within their education setting. McDermott et al. (2023) report that LGBTQ+ young people display elevated levels of emotional wellbeing difficulties when compared to heterosexual and cisgender peers, with the school environment noted as being a significant risk factor due to its "consistent association with negative mental health outcomes for LGBTQ+ young people" (McDermott et al., 2023). When LGBTQ+ young people do experience

discrimination or instances of bullying, as almost half of them are reported to (Bradlow et al., 2017), there also appears to be a correlation between this and these young people displaying lower levels of self-esteem, along with developing negative feelings regarding their own identity (Wright and Wegner, 2012).

McDermott et al. (2023) and Rafter et al. (2023) have both reported on research which details the increased prevalence of LGBTQ+ young people developing symptoms of mental health difficulties, including depression, self-harm, suicidal ideation and substance misuse issues. Schlief et al. (2023) have also discussed how young people who are classed as being from a sexual minority are twice as likely to experience mental health difficulties compared with heterosexual peers. Additionally, trans, non-binary and gender non-conforming young people are six times more likely to report historical suicide attempts than cisgender heterosexual peers, with bisexual young people and lesbian and gay young people being five and four times more likely respectively (McDermott et al., 2023). Difficulties at school relating to their sexuality and/or gender also resulted in the majority of young people in a study by National Youth Chances (2014) reporting that their school experience was characterised by experiences of hostility and fear, leading to feeling excluded, achieving poorer grades, and having to change schools (McDermott et al., 2023).

For trans, non-binary and gender non-conforming young people their experiences of being misgendered or referred to by their ‘dead name’ (their birth name which may no longer correspond to the new name by which they wish to be known as part of social transition) is also a barrier to inclusion. Rafter et al. (2023) refer to it as identity denial, which can lead to them experiencing increased emotional distress. This finding is particularly concerning given the current draft guidance from the UK government on how schools should respond to pupils wishing to socially transition, especially as research suggests an improved sense of wellbeing can be achieved by trans pupils when they experience a sense of acceptance and validation within their education setting (McGowan et al., 2022).

Instances when LGBTQ+ pupils do not experience validation with their school, or when their school is contributing negatively in some way towards their emotional wellbeing, may stem from different levels of systems operating in the child or young

person's life. While bullying from peers has been noted as one significant issue, the attitudes of the wider school, including teaching staff, and its policies can also create a variety of difficulties for LGBTQ+ pupils. Previous studies into school experiences of LGBTQ+ young people have revealed that LGBTQ+ pupils can experience a sense of isolation and innate feelings of exclusion due to the lack of effective inclusive practices in place (Harris et al., 2022). What is interesting is that even when schools ostensibly do appear to have taken steps to positively address the positive inclusion of its LGBTQ+ pupil community, these can often be reactive in nature and not address the underlying culture of the school (Horton and Carlile, 2022) or can still result in isolating and 'othering' LGBTQ+ pupils due to ineffectual implementation (Harris et al., 2022).

This has also been seen in the way teachers engage with LGBTQ+ pupils. As mentioned previously in this review, the legacy of Section 28 endures in the sense of uncertainty that teachers who were working in that period, and who are still teaching, still experience in being able to effectively support LGBTQ+ pupils and this is particularly true for older LGBTQ+ teachers (Lee, 2019). This can be understood as an aspect of teachers' self-efficacy in effectively supporting LGBTQ+ pupils and addressing difficulties which they may face. Research in this area has shown that this self-efficacy can vary dramatically and can often be connected to a specific identity within the LGBTQ+ community, such as Brant's (2017) findings that teachers felt less confident supporting trans pupils compared with cisgender LGB pupils. Other research into teacher attitudes regarding their support for LGBTQ+ pupils also identified an apparent disconnect between teachers, who stated that they were confident in their abilities to address any issues impacting LGBTQ+ pupils, and pupils from the same school who felt that they did not want to raise issues they faced because they felt that they would not be dealt with effectively (Harris et al., 2021). This is another example of how attempts to support LGBTQ+ pupils need to be more than a surface-level exercise and address wider systemic challenges. In other instances, teachers have been found to display a desire to support LGBTQ+ pupils, whether through the curriculum or in more direct pastoral ways, but have felt restricted through a lack of training (Davy and Cordoba, 2020), fears over discussing topics which they are aware of as being "divisive" in wider society (Morgan and Taylor, 2019) or because of concerns over the policies of

their school. All these examples reaffirm the need for meaningful LGBTQ+ inclusion to be enacted across different levels of the ecosystemic model which has guided this literature review. This can prove challenging for schools with the presence of heteronormativity and cisnormativity at macro- and exosystemic levels often resulting in these barriers to effective inclusion being present in the microsystemic area of the school.

Interventions to support LGBTQ+ inclusion

Targeted interventions vs systemic approaches

With regards to attempts to support the positive inclusion of LGBTQ+ pupils at school, it is important to clarify the distinction between more targeted intervention approaches and broader systemic whole-school approaches. While adoption of the latter may include implementation of the former, this is not always the case, and it is necessary to distinguish between the two in terms of existing research.

Overall, the key differences between more targeted interventions and systemic whole-school approaches to promoting inclusion for LGBTQ+ pupils lie in their scope, focus and sustainability. The focus of targeted interventions is often on specific cohorts or individual LGBTQ+ pupils, for example running targeted support groups, peer mentoring schemes, or workshops. Their goals are usually to address specific needs or challenges faced by these pupils, such as providing emotional support or offering a safe space. Their implementation is often specific, shorter term and may involve liaison and delivery from external specialist services. From an EST perspective, these approaches can be viewed as existing at the individual and microsystemic level, and within the three-dimensional research space they tend to move inward as they retain a predominant focus on individual feelings and reactions.

In contrast, systemic approaches at a whole-school level approach inclusion for LGBTQ+ pupils from the perspective of creating a more inclusive environment for all students at the school. This is sought to be achieved through the embedding of LGBTQ+

inclusion into wider school policy, practices and culture. The goal of this style of approach is a focus on changing the school's overall ethos and culture so that LGBTQ+ inclusion is incorporated into every facet of the school system. Its wider 'bird's eye' approach to promoting positive inclusion is an example of moving outwards in the three-dimensional research space to examine broader contextual factors and aligns with the macrosystemic level of EST.

From a feminist post-structuralist perspective, these systemic whole-school approaches have the potential to challenge and disrupt previously held views of normative LGBTQ+ inclusion, to queer it, whereas targeted interventions, while well intentioned, may still exist within a cis-and-heteronormative system. For example, McDermott et al. (2023) found that approaches to inclusion which explicitly tackled dominant cis-and-heteronormative perspectives can improve LGBTQ+ pupils' mental health. They also reported that collaborative leadership across school system hierarchies was integral to effective whole-school inclusion approaches, reflecting the importance placed on this element by the updated *Index for Inclusion* (Booth and Ainscow, 2011). This provides further support to the feminist post-structuralist and queer theoretical idea that for successful inclusion of LGBTQ+ pupils to occur, a disruption of normative structures needs to take place across every aspect of the school system, instead of making attempts to use the existing resources of systems which contribute to LGBTQ+ exclusion in the first place. When this does not happen, it can result in some targeted interventions having the potential to feel reactive in nature, as discussed by Horton and Carlile (2022). For this reason, while targeted, focused intervention approaches to inclusion may often be effective in addressing immediate or shorter-term issues, they may not have a more sustained positive impact unless delivered as part of broader and potentially more nuanced adaption to wider school culture and climate.

Targeted interventions

LGBTQ+ school clubs

One of the most common targeted interventions implemented by schools to support LGBTQ+ pupils is some form of social support group. These groups may be specifically focused on LGBTQ+ individuals, or sometimes a particular identity within this demographic, but within existing research there is a prevalence of 'gay-straight alliance' style groups (Poteat et al., 2013; Russell, et al., 2021; Day et al., 2019) which have the intention of fostering a sense of belonging and greater mutual understanding between pupils of different identities (Harris et al., 2021; Leonard, 2022). Existing research into their effectiveness has noted that these groups can act as a positive space for LGBTQ+ pupils (Schlief et al. 2023), with LGBT Youth Scotland (2018) highlighting the beneficial impact on student resilience and emotional wellbeing. Research by Stonewall (Bradlow et al., 2017) also suggested that LGBTQ+ pupils in schools with a specific LGBTQ+ club reported feeling safer and more supported in their school environment.

However, other research such as that of Harris et al. (2021) has raised the issue of whether attendance at a specific LGBTQ+ club risks putting LGBTQ+ pupils at additional risk through the process of 'outing' (in this context, deliberately or inadvertently revealing an individual's LGBTQ+ identity against their wishes or before they are ready to 'come out' of their own accord). Along with 'outing' there is also the question of whether such groups may act to 'other' LGBTQ+ pupils, particularly in schools where inclusive cultures are less embedded and can lead to such groups feeling tokenistic in nature. In these instances, providing LGBTQ+ pupils with their own separate space, while not addressing wider systemic needs, could perpetuate a sense of isolation and exclusion through the intimation that their identities are fundamentally different from their cisgender and heterosexual peers.

From the queer theory and feminist post-structuralism perspective that guides this literature review there is also a question of whether LGBTQ+ student groups may reinforce assimilationist ideas around LGBTQ+ identities, particularly those around

gender diversity. This may particularly occur when the wider school structure and culture continues to ascribe to cis-and-heteronormative ideals and the club acts to promote a form of 'respectable' LGBTQ+ identity (white, cisgender, able-bodied, binary sexuality classification, etc.) rather than challenge and contest the systemic conditions which have created their marginalisation and which it should be seeking to dismantle. This critique appears to be supported by a report by the LGBTQ+ youth charity Just Like Us (2020) who found that some LGBTQ+ school clubs predominantly cater for gay and lesbian pupils, with less focus on bisexual and trans identities. This lack of representation may reflect wider, macrosystemic societal trends which often further marginalise specific groups within the LGBTQ+ community.

1:1 Emotional wellbeing and mental health support

The mental health challenges faced by LGBTQ+ pupils in UK secondary schools are well-documented in the literature. A range of studies highlights that LGBTQ+ students are at an elevated risk for mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, self-harm, and suicidal ideation (Stonewall, 2017; McDermott, 2020). Despite increasing recognition of these issues, substantial gaps remain in the provision of mental health support tailored to this demographic. Many LGBTQ+ students report that they do not feel supported by school staff or peers, and that mental health services are not sufficiently equipped to address their specific needs (Stuart, 2019). This gap in support is often attributed to a lack of LGBTQ+-specific training among school staff and a general lack of awareness about the particular challenges faced by LGBTQ+ students (Rivers, 2013). According to the LGBTQ+ charity Stonewall, only 40% of LGBTQ+ students feel that their school provides adequate mental health support (Stonewall, 2020). Interventions are also often inconsistent across schools, with some institutions offering robust support networks while others fail to provide sufficient resources. Additionally, LGBTQ+ students may be reluctant to seek mental health support due to concerns about stigma, fear of being outed, or negative past experiences with professionals. The invisibility of LGBTQ+ issues within many school mental health frameworks can further discourage students from accessing support services.

A promising development is the increasing inclusion of LGBTQ+-specific services within broader school mental health frameworks. For example, some schools have started partnering with external LGBTQ+ organisations to provide targeted counselling services and mental health resources (Doherty & Hughes, 2019). However, such partnerships are not universal, and many schools still fail to prioritise the mental health needs of LGBTQ+ students. Additionally, when such partnerships are in place, there exists a paucity of research into their outcomes in order to gauge their effectiveness.

Systemic approaches

LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculums

The inclusion of LGBTQ+ topics in school curricula is vital for fostering a more inclusive and respectful environment. LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculums can help to challenge harmful stereotypes, promote diversity, and provide students with the knowledge to respect and understand a range of sexual orientations and gender identities. They can help dismantle negative stereotypes about LGBTQ+ individuals, reduce bullying, and create more inclusive school cultures. Research shows that inclusive curriculums not only benefit LGBTQ+ students but also all students by promoting tolerance and acceptance. The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC, 2017) found that schools that embrace diversity and inclusion tend to have better overall learning environments, fostering mutual respect among students from diverse backgrounds.

Research indicates that LGBTQ+ inclusive education also has a profound impact on students' well-being, mental health, and academic performance. According to a 2017 study by Stonewall, LGBTQ+ students who reported experiencing inclusive education were less likely to face bullying, self-harm, or mental health issues (Stonewall, 2017). Additionally, inclusive education plays a role in promoting positive attitudes toward diversity and inclusion, which can contribute to long-term societal change. Students who receive education about LGBTQ+ issues are more likely to grow

into empathetic, tolerant adults who support equal rights and social justice (EHRC, 2017).

For LGBTQ+ students, inclusive curricula can provide a sense of belonging and validation. It acknowledges their identities and experiences, making them feel seen and respected. It also helps to challenge harmful stereotypes and misconceptions about LGBTQ+ people, which can be critical in preventing the internalisation of shame and stigma (Davidson, 2019). For example, LGBTQ+ history, when included in the curriculum, can help students understand the struggles and contributions of LGBTQ+ individuals throughout history, fostering pride and a sense of solidarity within the LGBTQ+ community.

However, the impact on non-LGBTQ+ students is also important. Exposure to LGBTQ+ issues can lead to increased understanding and tolerance. This is particularly relevant in an era of rising political and social polarisation. By promoting inclusive education, schools can play a role in counteracting discriminatory ideologies and providing students with the tools to engage with a diverse world in a respectful manner.

Despite the benefits of inclusive LGBTQ+ curriculums there remain significant barriers to their effective implementation. One element of this appears to be a disconnect between teacher views on LGBTQ+ topics they cover in lessons and the reality experienced by pupils. Harris et al. (2021) found that despite many teachers believing they introduced a positive number of LGBTQ+ examples in their teaching practice, many pupils either fail to notice or still find it insignificant within the wider context of their learning. This highlights a wider critique of inclusive curriculum attempts in that they still exist within school environments which continue to uphold cis-and-heteronormative structures which can constrain their effectiveness. This results in an educational environment where non-cisgender and non-heterosexual identities are sidelined, leading to feelings of alienation and marginalisation for LGBTQ+ students.

The structure of school policies and practices also often perpetuate cisnormative and heteronormative expectations. The implementation of gendered school uniforms, the separation of students based on gender in physical education

classes, and the use of binary language in school forms all reinforce the idea that students should conform to cisgender and heterosexual norms. These practices, while seemingly neutral, signal to LGBTQ+ students that their identities are not valid or acknowledged within the school environment.

From a feminist post-structuralist perspective, the persistence of cisnormativity and heteronormativity in the curriculum can be understood as a form of power that works to reinforce dominant ideologies about gender and sexuality. Judith Butler's (1990) concept of performative gender suggests that gender is not an innate or natural state, but rather a social construct that is continually enacted through language and behaviour. In the context of education, this perspective challenges the rigid, binary categorisation of gender and sexuality that underpins the curriculum. By failing to recognise the fluidity and diversity of gender and sexual identities, school curriculums which do not effectively accommodate and represent the breadth of experience of different sexuality and gender identities perpetuate a normative structure that marginalises those who do not conform to these standards.

Queer theory, which challenges the very categorisation of gender and sexuality, provides another useful lens through which to critique the barriers to LGBTQ+ inclusion in the curriculum. Sedgwick (1990) and Michael Warner (1999) argue that the very categorisation of sexual and gender identities into fixed categories of "heterosexual" and "homosexual," or "cisgender" and "transgender," is inherently limiting and exclusionary. Queer theory, in contrast, embraces fluidity, ambiguity, and the rejection of fixed identities.

In the context of secondary school education, queer theory challenges the idea that the curriculum should reflect a set of predefined, normative categories of identity. Instead, it advocates for an approach that recognises the multiplicity of gender and sexual identities and embraces the potential for subverting dominant norms. Queer theory highlights how the enforcement of cisnormative and heteronormative structures in education reinforces power dynamics that marginalise LGBTQ+ students and restrict the possibilities for self-expression and identity formation (Warner, 1999).

Queer theory also challenges the notion that LGBTQ+ identities should only be addressed in a specialised, "separate" space within the curriculum, as is often the case with discrete topics like same-sex relationships or LGBTQ+ history. Instead, queer theorists argue that LGBTQ+ perspectives should be woven throughout all subjects and integrated into the broader educational experience, so as not to position these identities as exceptional or deviant (Sedgwick, 1990). In doing so, queer theory advocates for an inclusive curriculum that challenges normative assumptions and provides a more expansive understanding of identity.

Language and discourse

The role of language and discourse in UK secondary schools plays a crucial part in shaping the effectiveness of an LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum. Language is not merely a tool of communication; it carries ideological weight, conveys power structures, and can either foster an inclusive environment or perpetuate marginalisation. As the ontological position of constructivism underpins this literature review and the wider current study, and the narrative methodology seeks to understand the ‘stories’ that individuals tell about their experiences, consideration of language and discourse is vital in understanding how LGBTQ+ inclusion is effectively implemented and how it causes barriers to this.

Language plays a central role in shaping students' perceptions of the world around them, including gender and sexuality. According to a report by Stonewall (2017), the use of inclusive language in schools can promote a safer and more supportive environment for LGBTQ+ students. Schools that use inclusive language, such as referring to "partner" instead of "husband" or "wife," or using gender-neutral terms like "they" or "them," contribute to the normalisation of diverse sexualities and gender identities. This shift challenges traditional heteronormative assumptions and helps to create an inclusive space where all students can see themselves reflected in the curriculum.

Discourse, as the way language is used within educational contexts, further shapes the acceptability of LGBTQ+ issues in schools. In schools where LGBTQ+ issues are openly discussed, the discourse tends to be more positive and affirming. For example, the introduction of LGBTQ+ inclusive lessons in Personal, Social, Health, and Economic Education (PSHE) can be transformative when accompanied by inclusive discourse. Teachers who actively use LGBTQ+ affirming language in the classroom set a tone that reflects inclusivity and respect. The curriculum can also reflect multiple narratives of LGBTQ+ history, culture, and activism, helping to dismantle myths and stereotypes. However, the way language is used in the discourse surrounding LGBTQ+ inclusivity can either hinder or support the effectiveness of these educational efforts. For example, using the term "gay" as a derogatory term or perpetuating harmful stereotypes about LGBTQ+ people can undermine the intended goals of inclusivity. Schools where such language is normalised, or where LGBTQ+ issues are not openly discussed, may inadvertently foster an environment where homophobia and transphobia are allowed to flourish (Fish, 2021).

Research suggests that while policies may mandate inclusivity, the actual implementation can vary significantly between schools, often depending on the views and attitudes of individual staff members. In some schools, the discourse surrounding LGBTQ+ issues may be limited to a few hours of instruction, with little attention paid to ongoing support for LGBTQ+ students. In others, LGBTQ+ issues may be treated as "special topics" that are discussed only in certain contexts, rather than being integrated into the curriculum as a whole. This inconsistency reflects the tension between institutional policies and the lived realities of teachers and students.

Teachers themselves play a key role in shaping the discourse within their classrooms. A study by DePalma and Atkinson (2009) highlighted that teachers who were comfortable using inclusive language and engaging with LGBTQ+ topics were more likely to create a safe and supportive environment for LGBTQ+ students. However, teachers' own attitudes and understanding of LGBTQ+ issues can significantly impact their ability to deliver an effective inclusive curriculum. In schools where LGBTQ+ topics are viewed as controversial, the use of inclusive language may be resisted, leading to a fragmented or superficial approach to inclusivity.

Research conducted by practitioner psychologists

In recent years, an emerging strand of research conducted by practitioner psychologists, including Trainee Educational Psychologists, have begun to explore the experiences of LGBTQ+ young people in UK secondary schools and the role which both Educational Psychologists and other school practitioners have in fostering inclusive environments. Although this literature remains relatively limited, the following section details some of the recent important studies in this area.

McGowan et al. (2020) included the voices of young people with diverse sexuality and gender identities and found that instances of victimisation were strongly predictive of a reduced sense of belonging for LGBTQ+ pupils within their school. The study argues that belonging is a core human need, yet many LGBTQ+ students in UK schools do not experience it on a consistent basis. These were also findings discussed by Freedman (2019) whose study suggested themes of bullying, dismissiveness, and a lack of both school and therapeutic support for the trans young people who participated in the study. Similarly, Dowle (2024) investigated retrospective accounts of young people aged 16-24 concerning their secondary school experiences and their visions of an ideal inclusive school. The study reports that while many schools remain rooted in heteronormative culture, the young people who participated were able to offer insights into factors which would support greater levels of inclusion, including opportunities to foster positive peer relationships, greater curriculum representation for LGBTQ+ topics, and gender neutral policies. In all three studies, a predominant theme is that inclusive school culture matters for the wellbeing of LGBTQ+ pupils and that a key way to achieve this is through the active disruption of cis-and-heteronormative policies which frequently hinder pupils' sense of belonging. This is further supported by McDermott et al. (2023) which discusses how inclusive practices enhance belonging, recognition, safety and coping, thereby improving mental health outcomes for LGBTQ+ pupils. For Educational Psychologists, this suggests that beyond

academic inclusion, there is a wellbeing dimension in which inclusive practice holds significant psychological significance.

In terms of Educational Psychologist perspectives on supporting LGBTQ+ pupils, Caulfield (2024) has investigated how confident both teachers and Educational Psychologists felt to support LGBTQ young people in schools. The key finding from this study is that both groups' self-efficacy is enhanced by professional development and by personal lived experience of LGBTQ identities, both direct and indirect. Conversely, participant self-efficacy is undermined by fears of resistance, a perceived lack of mastery in understanding LGBTQ+ experiences, and working within a culture which displays increasingly politically charged discussion of gender diversity. Similar themes were identified in the study by Sagzan (2019) who explored Educational Psychologist perspectives on how best support trans pupils. Participants felt that their role was influenced by themes of awareness, beliefs which may influence practice, and discussions around gender diversity. However, those included in the study also felt that they were able to have varying degrees of positive influence on these areas. This was also discussed by Freedman (2019) where the role of the Educational Psychologist in positively supporting school systems to effectively meet the varied needs of trans and gender diverse young people was advocated for. The systematic review conducted by New-Brown et al. (2024) into the perspectives of psychologists supporting gender diverse children and young people in school settings also highlighted the importance of the environment in which psychologists were working, the reliance on their own views and values to guide their work in the absence of clear guidance, the role psychologists saw they had to advocate for gender diverse young people, and discussion of the systemic barriers which they were battling against.

For Educational Psychologists working in secondary schools, this literature suggests that key areas of their practice can have a positive impact on effective support and inclusion for LGBTQ+ pupils. This includes consultation with school leadership around whole-school inclusive culture, facilitation of staff training around LGBTQ inclusion, supporting pupils' sense of belonging, and auditing school policies regarding

gender and sexuality. However, there still remains a relative paucity of research in this area, particularly by Trainee Educational Psychologists and Educational Psychologists on the direct experiences of LGBTQ secondary pupils within mainstream schools, as many studies rely on retrospective accounts of young adults or the perspectives of professionals.

Opportunities for further research

Harris et al. (2022) have discussed how the inclusion of student voices in research can provide insight into the distinct educational needs of certain demographics. Holding this point in mind highlights that while existing research has provided some initial useful insights into the experiences of LGBTQ+ pupils in UK secondary schools, there are also notable limitations in the methodologies employed to capture student voice.

Much of the existing literature relies on surveys, quantitative data, and structured interviews, which often fail to capture the rich, personal experiences of LGBTQ+ pupils. To gain a deeper understanding of how LGBTQ+ pupils experience inclusion (or exclusion) within schools, a more qualitative and contextually grounded methodology would be beneficial. As LGBTQ+ young people can often have their identities marginalised or misunderstood, research which emphasises rich and detailed stories, and which gives participants a voice to share their experiences on their own terms, has the potential to be validating and provide important opportunities for self-expression. Existing research on LGBTQ+ pupils in UK secondary schools has often relied on generalisations and large-scale data, which can obscure the individual experiences of students. Future research would benefit from exploration of individual storytelling which allows for a more nuanced understanding of how different students experience inclusion in diverse ways. As part of this, at a time when many adults have an opinion on issues impacting LGBTQ+, future research which readdresses the balance through exploring the internal processes which LGBTQ+ young people go through has the potential to be emancipatory in nature. This could include their

emotional responses to discrimination or acceptance, their sense of belonging, and their potential struggles with identity formation. It also accounts for the breadth of experiences within a larger social context, enabling researchers to understand the ways in which school environments such as peer relationships, teacher attitudes, and institutional policies impact LGBTQ+ students' lives. Such future research would also address the limitations of existing studies that have primarily focused on negative aspects, such as bullying (Formby, 2015), by providing a fuller picture of LGBTQ+ students' experiences, including moments of support, solidarity, and empowerment.

Although many secondary schools in the UK have adopted inclusive policies or are working towards being more LGBTQ+-friendly, there is limited long-term research on the effectiveness of these policies. Most studies, including those conducted by *Stonewall* (2017), focus on short-term evaluations or snapshot surveys, often failing to track the sustained impact of inclusive interventions over time. Longitudinal studies could assess how the introduction of LGBTQ+-inclusive curricula, anti-bullying policies, and support systems affect both the academic outcomes and mental well-being of LGBTQ+ students. Additionally, future research which seeks to gain rich, qualitative accounts of LGBTQ+ student experiences of systemic interventions would be an interesting area of focus. Systemic interventions aimed at LGBTQ+ inclusion are crucial for creating safer and more supportive school environments. However, existing research indicates that these interventions often fall short in meeting the needs of LGBTQ+ students, with many still facing bullying, exclusion, and marginalisation (Horton, 2022; Harris et al., 2021; Horton and Carlile, 2022). To deepen our understanding of how systemic interventions impact LGBTQ+ students, future research should embrace rich qualitative methods which can provide a more nuanced, holistic understanding of LGBTQ+ students' experiences and help identify areas where policies and practices need to be adapted to better support these students. By capturing these narratives, researchers could identify gaps between the intentions of systemic policies and the lived experiences of students, offering actionable insights for policy development. Future qualitative research into this area would also be useful in allowing researchers to explore how inclusion or exclusion occurs over time, highlighting the changing nature of students' identities and experiences as they

progress through secondary school. This could be particularly important in understanding how students' sense of belonging and well-being evolves, providing insight into the long-term effects of inclusivity or marginalisation within the school environment.

Finally, the role of digital platforms in shaping LGBTQ+ students' experiences is an emerging area that warrants further exploration. Digital platforms have become increasingly central in shaping the experiences of LGBTQ+ students, influencing their social interactions (Beemyn, 2017), identity development (Cronesbury & Ward, 2024), and overall mental health. A growing body of research has examined how digital platforms, such as social media, online communities, and educational technology, play a role in fostering LGBTQ+ students' sense of belonging and support. However, significant gaps remain in understanding the full scope of these influences, particularly across diverse demographics, geographic locations, and intersecting identities. With the increasing use of social media, LGBTQ+ students now have access to online communities that offer support, information, and a sense of belonging. However, online platforms can also expose students to cyberbullying and other negative experiences. Little research exists on how secondary schools can support students in navigating both the positive and negative aspects of digital and social media.

Future research could investigate how schools can integrate digital literacy programs to educate students about online safety, foster positive online interactions, and leverage digital platforms to create supportive virtual spaces for LGBTQ+ students. Research could also explore the role of social media in shaping LGBTQ+ identity development and whether these online communities supplement or conflict with school-based inclusion efforts.

Conclusion

While notable strides have been made in improving societal attitudes towards LGBTQ+ identities, young people in this community continue to face significant challenges in educational settings that impact their emotional and psychological well-being. The school environment, often characterised by bullying, exclusion, and a lack of

effective support systems, remains a significant risk factor for LGBTQ+ pupils, contributing to elevated levels of mental health issues such as depression, self-harm, and suicidal ideation. As outlined by McDermott et al. (2023) and others, these challenges are compounded by systemic factors, such as teachers' uncertainty in providing support, a lack of LGBTQ+ specific training, and school policies that often reflect cisnormative and heteronormative ideals. Despite efforts to address these issues through targeted interventions like LGBTQ+ support clubs and mental health programs, these initiatives often fall short of fostering long-term, systemic change within schools.

A holistic, whole-school approach that integrates LGBTQ+ inclusion into every facet of school culture and policy is essential for creating meaningful and sustained change. Research highlights that effective LGBTQ+ inclusion requires a shift away from reactive, short-term interventions towards a more comprehensive approach that challenges and dismantles the cisnormative and heteronormative frameworks embedded in school environments. By incorporating LGBTQ+ perspectives across all subjects, embracing inclusive curricula, and ensuring that teachers and staff receive adequate training, schools can foster a culture of acceptance and validation for all students, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Ultimately, for LGBTQ+ pupils to thrive, their identities must be fully acknowledged and respected within their educational environments. The integration of LGBTQ+ inclusion across school policies, practices, and culture, in tandem with targeted interventions, can create an atmosphere where all students feel safe, valued, and empowered. While challenges remain, the potential for systemic transformation offers hope for a future in which LGBTQ+ young people can experience education free from discrimination, and with the emotional and social support they deserve.

Chapter 2: Empirical Chapter

Abstract

This study explores the storied experiences of a transgender teenager within a UK secondary school and their wider life. This exploration seeks to understand and account for how concepts of identity, power, and belonging interact and intersect and to what extent this may promote or hinder positive experiences.

This study uses a narrative inquiry methodology to gain a rich and nuanced understanding of the embodied and relational dimensions of school life for one transgender young person. The focus on a single participant serves as a powerful lens through which broader social and institutional dynamics can be critically examined, without reducing the participant's experience to a tokenised example. The study also uses the new materialist framework of assemblage theory to understand how the stories of a transgender teenager are influenced by different entanglements of human, non-human, and material relations.

Findings highlight important narrative threads around community, both on-and-offline, shifting concepts of visibility, and emergent, fluid identity development. All three narrative threads offer instances of affirmation, relief and belonging while also being areas which can require careful navigation to reduce feelings of apprehension or perceived threat. At a time when wider social discussions about transgender young people do not readily account for their voices, this study provides an opportunity to gain an important insight into the lived experiences of one transgender teenager. In doing so it highlights important questions and reflections for professionals and researchers alike about how to better support transgender young people and involve them as active participants in telling their own stories.

Research rationale

Transgender young people continue to face disproportionate levels of marginalisation, discrimination, and social challenges in educational contexts (Schlief et al., 2023). Within secondary schools in particular, these young people often encounter institutional, interpersonal, and internalised forms of transphobia that can severely impact their academic engagement, mental health, and overall sense of belonging (Horton, 2021; Harries et al., 2021). Despite increasing visibility and advocacy around transgender rights, research suggests that schools remain sites of struggle for many transgender students, especially during adolescence, a developmental period marked by heightened identity formation and social vulnerability (McDermott et al., 2023).

In light of these systemic challenges, it becomes imperative to centre the lived experiences of transgender young people within research in ways that resist reductive or pathologising narratives. Narrative inquiry provides a particularly powerful framework for this endeavour. By focusing on the stories that individuals tell about their lives, narrative inquiry foregrounds meaning-making, subjectivity, and agency (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008). It allows researchers to engage deeply with participants' perspectives and attend to the sociocultural contexts that shape and are shaped by these narratives.

This study seeks to use narrative inquiry to explore the experiences of a transgender teenager navigating secondary education in the United Kingdom. The rationale for this methodological choice rests on several intersecting concerns. Firstly, transgender young people are often spoken about in research rather than being positioned as active meaning-makers in their own right (McKay et al., 2025; Skinner et al., 2025). Narrative inquiry disrupts this pattern by privileging participants’ voices and the ways they construct and interpret their own identities and experiences. Secondly, stories are not just reflections of experience, they are also constitutive of identity (Dela Cruz, 2014). For transgender young people, whose identities are frequently questioned or erased, the act of storytelling can be both affirming and politically subversive (McKay et al., 2025).

Additionally, narrative inquiry allows for a nuanced exploration of temporality and context, critical dimensions for understanding how transgender identity is negotiated across time and space within the school environment (Clandinin et al., 2016). Rather than isolating specific incidents or outcomes, this approach traces the unfolding of experience in relation to broader cultural discourses, institutional norms, and personal aspirations. In doing so, rather than constraining experiences to neat and organised examples, it also creates space for contradiction, ambiguity, and transformation. These are elements which are often intrinsic to the journeys of transgender young people as they navigate heteronormative and cisnormative education settings (McDermott et al., 2023).

To this end, this study seeks to illuminate one transgender teenager's experiences, both in the school context and their wider life, through a narrative approach. Particular attention is given to the interplay of gender identity, peer and teacher interactions, school policies, and personal resilience. In doing so, the study contributes to a growing body of qualitative research that aims to humanise and acknowledge the complexity of the lives of transgender young people (McKay et al., 2025; Skinner et al., 2025; Reed, 2023). It also adds further weight to arguments in favour of adopting more inclusive, responsive, and affirming educational practices which are informed by the voices of those from marginalised identity demographics.

Research Aims and Addressing the Research Puzzle

Grounded in the recognition that identity is both shaped by and shapes social contexts, this study seeks to illuminate how a transgender young person navigates the everyday realities of school life, including interactions with peers, school staff, and institutional norms. By foregrounding the participant's own story, this study aims not to generalise, but rather to deepen understanding of the nuanced, relational, and temporal nature of gendered experiences in educational spaces.

Rather than beginning with a fixed research question, the study is guided by a research puzzle**.** This is a conceptual stance that reflects the open-ended, emergent,

and storied nature of narrative inquiry (Dela Cruz, 2014). In the context of the study, this research puzzle is conceptualised as:

- *How is the experience of being a transgender teenager storied within the context of school?*
- *What might these stories reveal about the interplay of identity, power, and belonging in educational spaces?*

This puzzle reflects a desire to understand not only what happens to a transgender student in school, but *how* they make sense of these experiences over time, and in relation to others. Narrative inquiry, with its focus on temporality, sociality, and place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), allows for a rich, contextual exploration of these dimensions. Through co-constructing and analysing life stories with one transgender teenager, this study aims to attend closely to the shifting landscapes of self, relationships, and institutions that are threaded through their experiences. The research also seeks to contribute to broader conversations around inclusion, identity affirmation, and educational justice by offering a textured account that resists reductionist or pathologising narratives. In doing so, the study seeks to honour the complexity of the young person's voice and story, while attending to the institutional and relational contexts in which it is told and lived.

Methodology

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research methodology that explores how individuals interpret and make sense of their experiences through storytelling. Narrative inquiry emphasises the co-construction of meaning between the researcher and participants, acknowledging that stories are both shaped by and help shape the social and cultural contexts in which they are told (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

This methodology is particularly suited to exploring complex, lived experiences that unfold over time, as it allows participants to present their perspectives in a holistic and temporally structured manner (Riessman, 2008). By focusing on the narratives people construct about their lives, researchers can access the nuances of identity,

agency, and relational dynamics that may not be readily observable through other qualitative approaches. The narrative approach recognises that stories are not mere recollections of events, but are active constructions of the self in context, shaped by cultural, social, and relational influences (Chase, 2005).

The narrative inquiry approach also aligns with queer and critical pedagogical frameworks that advocate for the amplification of marginalised voices and the disruption of normative assumptions in educational research. By focusing on one individual, this study highlights the nuanced, embodied, and relational dimensions of school life for a transgender young person, details which might be lost in larger-scale studies. The focus on a single participant thus serves as a powerful lens through which broader social and institutional dynamics can be critically examined, without reducing the participant's experience to a tokenised example.

The three-dimensional research space: creating conditions for stories to be told

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) described the framework for narrative inquiry as a "three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, where inquirers travel – inward, outward, backward, forward, and within place" (p. 49). Using the three-dimensional research space enables a rich exploration of participants' lived experiences through the dimensions of temporality (the understanding of experiences over time in the past, present and future), sociality (personal and social relationships), and place (the physical environments in which experiences occur). Dela Cruz (2014) describes the virtues of this approach in understanding the experiences of others relating to a particular phenomenon:

> "Situating the phenomenon in this fluid, dynamic, ever-evolving space is unique to narrative inquiry as a methodology. It challenges the formalistic notion that a phenomenon under study is fixed and one-dimensional, happening at a moment in time. It supports the idea that a phenomenon under study has a history and a future." (dela Cruz, 2014, p.55)

This approach was felt to be particularly valuable in understanding the nuanced, often complex, experiences of a trans young person within school

environments. Specifically, some of the means in which it was hoped the three-dimensional research space would aid in understanding the stories being told were:

Temporality: what are the young person's experiences over time, recognising that identities and understandings of inclusion are not static but shaped by past experiences, present contexts, and imagined futures (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Sociality: what are the personal conditions (such as feelings, hopes, and personal identity) and social conditions (such as cultural norms, institutional policies, and interpersonal relationships) that influence experiences (Clandinin, 2013). Through exploring this, the research examined how the young person navigates inclusion in relation to peers, teachers, family, and wider school culture. This lens was critical for capturing the relational and emotional aspects of inclusion, including moments of affirmation as well as marginalisation.

Place: what are the specific physical and metaphorical spaces where stories occur, or occurred, including classrooms, school corridors, online platforms, or spaces outside school. This aspect acknowledged that environments significantly impact lived experience (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). For transgender pupils, the physical and cultural geography of the school can play a significant role in shaping feelings of safety, belonging, inclusion, or exclusion (Horton & Carlile, 2022).

Using this three-dimensional narrative space allowed for a holistic and ethically sensitive engagement with the young person's stories, ensuring that individual experiences were not decontextualised from their broader temporal, social, and spatial contexts. This was particularly beneficial in understanding the stories of experience, as it facilitated an approach that honored complexity, resisted reductionist narratives, and fostered empathetic understandings (Clandinin, 2016). Additionally, it supported a co-constructive process, integral to narrative inquiry methodology, where meaning was jointly developed between researcher and participant. Narrative inquiry is a recursive process for both the researcher and participant, moving between phases of inquiry, negotiating and working together in each phase (dela Cruz, 2014). As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state "to experience an experience, that is, to do research into an experience, is to experience it simultaneously . . . [in these directions]" (p. 50).

Theoretical Frameworks

Ecological Systems Theory

One of the guiding theoretical frameworks for this research is that of Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Ecological Systems Theory emphasises the interconnected layers of an individual's environment through consideration of factors within the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem which shape development and experiences over time.

Ecological Systems Theory provided a structured lens through which the young person in this study's narrative could be examined holistically. It aided in recognising the influence of multiple, interacting social contexts**.** At the microsystem level was the exploration of the young person's interactions with family members, peers, teachers, and school staff. The mesosystem highlighted how relationships among these environments either reinforced or complicated her sense of identity and belonging.

At the exosystemic level**,** the study considered the influence of broader systems that affected the young person indirectly, such as school policies.
The macrosystem offered insight into the cultural norms, legal frameworks, and societal values that shaped the young person's lived reality as a transgender teenager. Finally, the chronosystem accounted for the dimension of time, something which is important within the application of the three-dimensional research space of narrative inquiry, exploring how the young person's experiences and identity evolved alongside changing social climates and personal milestones.

Feminist Post-Structuralism

The application of Ecological Systems Theory is also informed by feminist post-structuralism. In adopting this systematic, post-structuralist approach to understanding the experiences of a trans pupil in her school environment, also found in

Xu and Roegman's (2023) systematic review of protective factors for trans and gender non-conforming young people at high school, this study provides further contribution to research which seeks to queer the school climate (Xu & Roegman, 2023). By adopting a guiding theoretical approach which queers the focus of research into the lived experience of a trans young person, this study could consider the dynamic ways systems interact around a young people who themselves is queering normalised understandings of sexuality and gender.

Additionally, using feminist post-structuralism as part of a narrative inquiry methodology allowed the study to centre the young person's own narrative through the weaving of identity, discourse and subjective meaning making. It also aided in informing consideration on inclusive practice through offering insights into the young person's experiences while respecting self-definition and challenging oppressive systemic structures. In doing so, feminist post-structuralism complements narrative inquiry in its endeavour to yield rich, reflexive accounts which validate personal experience and critically engage with power dynamics, something which is of importance when conducting research into the experiences of marginalised gender demographics.

Queer Theory

Queer theory also offered a powerful and nuanced lens through which to understand the lived experiences the young person in the study. This was especially true when used within the narrative inquiry methodology and it also complemented the guiding use of feminist post-structuralism due to its challenging of normative conceptions of gender and sexuality (Butler, 1990). When applied as a theoretical framework for narrative inquiry, queer theory supports the exploration of stories that defy dominant social norms and instead foreground the complexity, agency, and resilience of trans lives.

Queer theory complemented a narrative inquiry methodology as it seeks to prioritise embodied, subjective knowledge and views identity as performative and socially constructed rather than essential or fixed. Queer theory encourages researchers to attend to the ways in which the narratives of those from marginalised

genders and sexualities challenge or subvert social expectations around gender and how these narratives are shaped by social, cultural, and institutional power dynamics (Puar, 2007).

Queer theory also foregrounds questions of power and resistance (Jagose, 1996), making it especially useful for highlighting how trans young people navigate and challenge systems that seek to regulate their identities. A key tenet of queer theory is in its embracing of ambiguity, contradiction, and multiplicity (Jagose, 1996). Rather than seeking coherence or resolution, queer theory values the messy, nonlinear aspects of identity formation and lived experience. This perspective is particularly important in studying the lives of trans young people, whose narratives may contain uncertainty, fluidity, or resistance to labels. When used as complementary frameworks, narrative inquiry guided by queer theory did not attempt to simplify these stories but instead honoured their complexity as an important means of gaining insight into how gender diversity is lived and experienced.

New Materialism and the Concept of the Assemblage

Understanding the stories being told in this research (of the young person, of myself, of the research, etc.) as types of assemblages aided in providing further clarity of thought when seeking to develop further meaning and understanding. Following the participant interviews, I therefore made the decision to incorporate new materialism and the concept of the assemblage (DeLanda, 2016) into the research as additional loose theoretical guides to complement existing perspectives of Ecological Systems Theory, feminist post-structuralism, and queer theory.

New materialism is a theoretical framework that challenges the traditional separation of matter and meaning, proposing instead that materiality (bodies, spaces, things) and discourse (language, narratives, representations) are co-constitutive. This means that it takes a view that materials and discourse shape, and are shaped by, one another. It emphasises the agency of non-human matter and understands the world as composed of intra-active relations (Barad, 2007), rather than interactions between separate entities. In this sense, intra-actions reflect the view that matter and meaning

are co-constituted through dynamic relations, not from pre-established, separate entities.

This ontological perspective was felt to be able to expand the constructivism of narrative inquiry by encouraging attention toward the material dimensions of storytelling. For example, in the case of the young person in this study a new materialist perspective encouraged consideration of how their body, clothing, physical school environment, medical care and technologies shape, and are shaped by, narrative experiences. New materialism also helps reposition the researcher and participant not as isolated subjects**,** but as entangled within broader assemblages. These include elements such as policies, school architecture and peer relationships and views them all as elements which co-produce the narrative.

Originating in the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and later DeLanda (2016), the concept of the assemblage and assemblage theory offers a further framework for understanding how social phenomena emerge through complex relationships between human and non-human elements. Rather than viewing social life as structured by stable categories or singular causes, assemblage thinking emphasises the fluid, dynamic, and contingent nature of experience. It was felt that this approach would be particularly well-suited to capturing the nuances of a transgender identity, which are shaped through intersecting discourses, materialities, spaces, affective forces, and power relations (Puar, 2007; Fox & Alldred, 2015).

The concept of the assemblage was used in this research to conceptualise schools not as static institutions, but as *assemblages*: constellations of people (students, teachers, peers), spaces (classrooms, corridors, bathrooms), discourses (gender norms, policies, curricula), and technologies (uniforms, digital platforms, surveillance systems). Additionally, the young person themselves was understood not as a fixed identity category, but as an embodied subjectivity continuously formed and re-formed through their entanglements with these elements (Renold & Ringrose, 2011). This approach enabled a move beyond binary framings of inclusion/exclusion or safe/unsafe to explore how the young person in the study negotiated and inhabited shifting terrains of possibility and constraint. In this way, assemblage theory's disruption of rigid binary constructions of different phenomena felt complementary to

feminist post-structuralist (Gannon & Davies, 2005) and queer theoretical (Jagose, 1996) perspectives which also seek to challenge dominant normative understandings of categories such as gender and sexuality as being fixed or innate.

Beyond the school itself, the concept of the assemblage also facilitated exploration of how out-of-school assemblages such as online communities, family dynamics, and youth services interacted with and sometimes disrupted school-based assemblages. These "cross-cutting" assemblages (Bennett, 2010) often played a crucial role in aspects of identity formation, resilience, and resistance strategies, allowing the young person to reconfigure or escape the limitations imposed by school environments.

Overall, the use of these theoretical frameworks was not done in a manner which was highly structured or formulaic in nature. Rather, they acted as guides which provided helpful and complementary tools and resources for promoting reflexivity during the exploration of the stories being narrated. This study is not seeking to provide measurable answers to preconceived questions but instead seeks to explore the puzzle of the young person at its heart. This young person, by the nature of the demographic of which they are part, is already disrupting normative understandings of identity. Utilising guiding frameworks which can better account for, and often actively engage in, similar disruption therefore felt important to do justice to the stories being told. As this storying progressed, the depth of the interconnectedness between the young person, her social interactions, her physical environment, and wider discourses became increasingly apparent. The flexible adoption of the above theoretical frameworks was therefore important in maintaining the ontological commitments of the study in understanding the multiplicities and subjectivities of the young person's lived experiences.

Ontology and Epistemology

Ontology refers to the researcher's assumptions about the nature of reality. This study adopts a relativist ontological position**,** which posits that reality is not objective or singular, but instead contains multiplicities and is socially constructed (Guba and

Lincoln, 1994). Within narrative inquiry, individuals are viewed as living storied lives and their experiences are understood as being shaped by personal, social, cultural, and historical contexts. This means that each participant's story is a version of reality that is meaningful within its own frame of reference. This ontological position maintains that there is no single truth to uncover but instead acknowledges the coexistence of multiple truths, each valid in its own right.

This study also adopts a social constructionist epistemological position. This means that it views knowledge and meaning as constructed through social interactions, language, and cultural context rather than discovered as objective facts (Andrews, 2012). This perspective emphasises that people make sense of their experiences through stories**,** which are shaped by the social worlds they inhabit.

Adopting a social constructionist position as part of a narrative inquiry methodology means that stories are understood to be co-constructed between the researcher and the participant, with recognition given to the fact that both have influence on the research process. This epistemological position also ensures that subjectivity is valued and that there is a predominant focus on how narratives are formed through the language used and the broader social, cultural and historical contexts which give them meaning. In this sense, a social constructionist epistemology aligns well with the three-dimensional research space of narrative inquiry as it can help in recognising the aspects of temporality, sociality and place in understanding the stories being narrated.

Recruitment

Initial contact was made with a local LGBTQ+ charity which has links to a number of secondary schools in the county, asking if they could send out information about the study to schools on my behalf. Schools which responded affirmatively to taking part were then contacted on a first come first served basis, with Head teachers acting as a further gatekeeper.

Initial emails were sent to three schools who responded, explaining the outline of the research, and including an information poster which could be shared with pupils, for example within an existing LGBTQ+ group at the school, on a noticeboard or in a newsletter. For one of these schools, I also went in to present the outline of the research to the school's lunchtime LGBTQ+ club. Following an ethics amendment granted in November 2024, emails were also sent to organisations who run local LGBTQ+ youth groups requesting permission to come and present the research project to young people, along with disseminating the research project information poster, to see if any of the young people who attend the youth group would wish to participate.

Following this process, one young person was initially recruited. After their initial expression of interest, information and consent forms were emailed to them and their parent for completion as the young person was under the age of sixteen. Consent forms were returned by parent and young person in January 2025. At this stage my hope was still of recruiting further participants, however this did not eventuate. Following discussions with my research supervisor and a programme director of the doctorate course where we considered the methodological aspects of focussing on a single participant, it was decided that I would continue with a single participant focus as it was felt that this would still satisfy narrative inquiry's aim to provide rich, nuanced and detailed analysis of the participant's lived experiences. The decision to focus on a single participant was also grounded in the desire to engage deeply and ethically with one individual's unique, contextualised experience, rather than to generalise across a broader population. Given the sensitive nature of gender identity and the potential vulnerability of the participant, a single participant design offered the flexibility and depth needed to prioritise relational ethics, trust-building, and respectful storytelling. It was also felt to be particularly suited to exploring the research puzzle which was seeking to understand complex phenomena within their real-life context.

Participant

As this study evolved, I came to understand it as a form of assemblage, made up of many constituent elements and a key component of the research assemblage is the

young person who participated and contributed so much of their time to discuss their experiences. Pseudonyms for the young person were collaboratively agreed upon, with the young person electing to use ‘Euryale’. Therefore, from this point onwards, this will be the name used to refer to the young person who took part in the study.

Euryale is a 15-year-old transgender female student attending a mainstream secondary school in the eastern region of the United Kingdom. At the time of the first interview, Euryale had been ‘out’ as transgender at school for only two weeks. Therefore, the subsequent interviews, over the period of three months, included discussion and recognition of how her experiences remained constantly in flux, something which aligns with the ontological positioning of the study’s narrative inquiry methodology and assemblage theory perspectives. Euryale gave up a significant amount of her time and demonstrated the capacity to provide rich, situated insights into the experience of transgender young people navigating gender identity both inside and outside of the school environment. Her narratives, identity positioning, and relational engagements form the core of this study’s analytical attention.

Ethical Considerations

It is critically important to include the voices of LGBTQ+ young people in research, particularly in fields related to education, mental health, and social policy. Their lived experiences offer essential insights into how systems and services can better respond to their needs (Russell & Fish, 2016). Without their perspectives, research risks reinforcing heteronormative narratives and perpetuating invisibility or misrepresentation (Formby, 2011). Engaging directly with LGBTQ+ young people also challenges dominant assumptions and can contribute to a more inclusive and socially just research agenda (Taylor et al., 2016). However, it is important that attempts to capture the voices of LGBTQ+ young people do not merely exist as tokenistic attempts at inclusion. There is a need to look beyond existing liberal and individualistic frameworks for gaining the perspectives of young people, particularly those from marginalised demographics. Dynamic, increasingly post-structuralist approaches

which utilise greater reflective and reflexive practice on the conditions for meaningfully capturing young people's voices, pay attention to temporalities, and which examine the ways institutional processes impact youth voices (Bragg, 2024) are important for achieving meaningful research into the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ young people. This is especially true within the context of their education settings. As the story of this research developed, as I plugged into this research assemblage and others which then informed it, Bragg's (2024) discussion around capturing meaningful youth voice felt increasingly pertinent:

> *"Audiences may listen selectively – amplifying the voices that are loudest, that are most coherently or pleasingly articulated, that chime with what they already believe or want to do, and muting those that are uncomfortable, in the 'wrong' register or to which it is not easy to respond. These selections often map onto familiar social divisions around class, gender, ethnicity. And finally, voice may not be solicited in sites or on topics that prove challenging for schools [including] sexuality and gender." (p.844)*

In considering the ethical aspects of the current research, this above perspective is one which I felt aligned with the theoretical, ontological, and methodological approaches which were guiding it. Conducting this research at a time when views on trans young people, and trans people generally, are increasingly polarised it felt crucial to utilise increasingly dynamic, dialogic, and disruptive research practices as a means to create a space for the 'challenging voices' to be heard.

Conducting research with LGBTQ+ young people necessitates careful ethical consideration due to the previously discussed historical marginalisation and ongoing stigmatisation experienced by this group (Fish, 2008; McDermott et al., 2017). Ethical research practices must be rooted in respect, sensitivity, and an awareness of power dynamics that may shape participant engagement and disclosure. Ensuring that participation is fully informed, voluntary, and confidential is not just a procedural requirement but a moral imperative in this context.

Despite the need for inclusive research, gaining ethical approval to work with LGBTQ+ youth can be challenging. University ethics committees may express concerns

about the perceived vulnerability of the population, often resulting in overly cautious approaches that can obstruct meaningful participation (Goldstein et al., 2017). For example, committees may require parental consent for under-18s, which can be ethically problematic when young people are not 'out' to their parents or where seeking permission might expose them to harm (Hill, 2015). Such procedural requirements can thus create additional barriers to participation, inadvertently silencing those who are most in need of having their experiences heard. This was an issue which occurred in this current research during the recruitment process where multiple young people wished to participate but reported they would be unable to gain the required parental consent, something which I was concerned was incongruent with The British Educational Research Association (2024) guidance on educational research which states that:

> *"the best interests of the child are the primary consideration, and children who are capable of forming their own views should be granted the right to express those views freely, and them taken into consideration, in all matters affecting them." (p.18)*

Consideration was therefore given to the possibility of utilising methods of gaining *in loco parentis* consent, as demonstrated in other recent research by Ferguson (2024) into the experiences of trans, non-binary and gender diverse young people in the context of secondary school Physical Education (PE). However, due to the time-constrictions of the current research as taking place as part of an applied doctorate training course, it was agreed following discussions with my primary and secondary research supervisors that this would not be achievable within the timescales the research was afforded.

Another consideration regarding ethics for the current research was how to balance the desire to engage in increasingly disruptive feminist post-structuralist and post-qualitative research methods while still configuring to what St. Pierre refers to as a "conventional humanistic qualitative methodology" which is an "institutionally approved methodological structure invented to respond to the paradigm wars of its time" (p.3). As will be discussed subsequently, this research engages with the deeply

personal and sensitive experiences of a transgender young person both within and external to the school context. Through ongoing reflexive discussion, I came to realise that the ethical dimensions of such a project extend beyond conventional procedural ethics and instead include an ongoing, situated, and relational ethics responsive to the entanglements of bodies, discourses, institutions, and affects. As Ferguson (2024) discusses, “[ethical] rigour is not demonstrated in the meticulous, systematic application of methods, but in the consistent embedding of an ethics of care.” (p.94). As the current study is shaped by post-qualitative and new materialist ontologies, ethics is therefore understood not merely as a set of rules or approvals, but as emergent, co-constituted, and entangled with the research process itself.

Ethical approval was sought and granted by the University of East Anglia's School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee (Appendix F). Consent processes were carefully adapted to ensure the young person and their parent understood the research aims, the fluid and evolving nature of the methodology, and their rights to withdraw at any time without consequence. However, from a new materialist perspective, the research does not treat consent as a static moment or single transaction; rather, it is understood as iterative and always becoming, responsive to shifts in comfort, affect, and context throughout the unfolding research assemblage.

Narrative inquiry, as enacted in the current research, does not seek to extract stories as discrete units from the young person who participated but instead attends to the co-construction of meaning through relational and situated encounters. Euryale's voice is honoured but also deconstructed through post-qualitative perspectives which question singular truths and stable identities. In doing so, care was taken to avoid reinscribing dominant narratives or essentialising representations of gender diversity. The evolution of the research methodology to include consideration of assemblage theory further challenges a human-centred ethics, foregrounding as it does the agency of non-human actors (e.g. school uniforms, bathrooms, pronouns, spatial arrangements) and the complex intra-actions that shape experience. With this in mind,

ethical responsibility becomes about attentiveness to these entanglements and the way power flows through them.

Given the risk of exposure or harm, particularly within the current socio-political climate for trans and gender-diverse young people, anonymity and confidentiality were prioritised, not as simple de-identification strategies, but as ongoing ethical practices negotiated throughout writing, analysis, and dissemination. Pseudonyms were collaboratively chosen, and Euryale was offered opportunities to review the emergent narratives and analytic interpretations.

Ultimately, this research seeks to be accountable to Euryale not only through procedural safeguards, but through an ethics of care, co-becoming, and responsibility that resists extractive modes of knowledge production. It aspires to make space for complexity, contradiction, and emergence, and to foreground the agency of the young person, other non-human objects, and myself as researcher (as will be discussed in the following section on researcher positionality). It does so while attempting to make meaning from stories without being constrained by ideas of fixed identity or experience within normative logics of intelligibility.

Researcher Positionality

Researcher positionality plays a significant role in shaping the research process and interpretation of data. When the researcher identifies as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, as is the case in the current study, this can facilitate rapport and reduce perceived distance between participant and researcher, potentially leading to richer, more authentic data (Browne & Nash, 2010). However, shared identity can also complicate claims of neutrality or objectivity. Reflexivity is essential to navigate these dynamics, particularly in recognising how personal experiences and emotions may influence methodological decisions and data interpretation (Bourke, 2014). While complete impartiality may be neither possible nor desirable, especially in social justice-oriented research, acknowledging and critically reflecting on one's positionality can enhance ethical rigor and transparency (Milner, 2007).

As a transgender researcher conducting a narrative inquiry into the experiences of a transgender young person, my positionality is inherently entangled with the research process. Rather than viewing myself as a detached observer, I acknowledge my role as an active participant in meaning-making, something which St. Pierre (2011) might describe as being within the assemblage of the research itself. Assemblage theory (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) rejects linearity and fixed categories, allowing me to embrace the fluid and relational dynamics between myself, the participant, and the broader educational, social, and political contexts that shape our identities and experiences.

My shared identity with Euryale fostered a foundation of trust, which was critical for narrative inquiry, a methodology that privileges lived experience, voice, and relational engagement (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This proximity allowed for nuanced conversations and deeper resonances, but it also required careful reflexivity to avoid overidentification or the imposition of my own experiences onto theirs. I regularly engaged in reflexive journaling (Appendix E) and frequent meetings with my supervisor to remain attentive to where our stories aligned and where they diverged.

Rather than positioning my transgender identity as a bias to be controlled or bracketed, I understand it as a vital lens through which knowledge is produced. My lived experience informed not only how I interpreted Euryale's narratives but also how I recognised the affective intensities and micro-politics that might otherwise be missed or misread. Through assemblage theory, I conceptualise both myself and Euryale not as stable subjects, but as becoming through our entanglements, whether these are with each other, with institutions, with discourse, or with material conditions.

This research therefore is not about speaking for Euryale but rather co-constructing knowledge through our encounters. The narratives shared are thus shaped by our mutual presence and the shared, yet distinct, trajectories we navigate as transgender individuals in a cisnormative educational landscape.

Data Collection: developing field texts

In narrative inquiry, data analysis is not a discrete or linear phase, but rather an ongoing, iterative process of meaning-making that begins with the first conversation and continues through the writing of research texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, 2013). Analysis in this study was conducted with a focus on relational responsibility, temporality, and resonance, emphasising co-construction over extraction.

Field texts were initially created utilising interview transcripts and interview audio recordings, researcher field notes, and Euryale's own objects of meaning. In narrative inquiry, field texts are the data or records collected during the research process that capture the experiences, stories, and contexts of participants. They serve as the foundation from which narrative accounts are developed. They help researchers understand how people make meaning of their experiences over time. In the context of the present study, the field texts were first reviewed in a holistic manner, with particular attention given to examining the flow of the narrative, its tone, and key moments of emotion or disruption. Interviews encouraged open-ended storytelling (Riessman, 2008), with prompts such as, "Can you tell me about…?" Euryale also brought an item to the first interview which represented inclusion to her in some way, and this was used as an initial conversation prompt in the first interview (see Figure 2). Euryale shared that this was a 'plushy' toy of a cartoon character which in some internet spaces has become a symbol synonymous with trans identities and inclusivity. Although she was unsure as to exactly how or why this character had become associated with trans identities, this initial conversation prompted further discussion of the importance of online communities, something which would feature as a predominant narrative thread.

Figure 2

Item which represents inclusion to Euryale

Throughout the research process, I also kept extensive and detailed field notes and reflexive diary entries which documented aspects such as relational dynamics, moments of insight, and ethical decision-making throughout the inquiry process.

In preparation for the interviews, close attention was paid to discussions by Clandinin and Connelly (2006) and their key considerations around completing an interview focussed narrative inquiry. In particular, their considerations around the duration of the study and attending to the issue of relational ethics within narrative inquiry felt pertinent in seeking to gain a rich and detailed account of Euryale's stories, while ensuring methodological rigour. Clandinin and Connelly (2006) assert that what is of most importance is:

> *"to spend sufficient time to compose a representation of each participant's experience that resonates with the participant's story of himself or herself" (p.484)*

To this end, while I had initially stated that a minimum of two interviews would be required to sufficiently attend to the temporal aspect of the three-dimensional research space, I also discussed with Euryale and her parent that as the interviews progressed further interviews could be required to explore the experiences being narrated. As discussed by Butina (2015), using multiple interviews is important within narrative inquiry as it:

> *"provides an opportunity to reflect on the previous interview and to build upon and explore participant's responses, thereby providing richer and thicker descriptions." (p.192)*

Euryale asserted that she would be happy with this and so as part of each interview I ensured that I discussed with her whether she felt there was further time required to sufficiently explore the stories she was telling. In this sense, discussions with Euryale around the number of interviews and where and when they occurred was more about further ensuring relational ethics and shared decision making, rather than being primarily concerned with 'sufficiency of data'. This was important as it ensured that Euryale was provided with sufficient space to articulate her experiences, while the research maintained a focus on uncovering the temporal aspects of these experiences. As Clandinin and Connelly (2006) discuss, while open questions which focus on the temporal aspect of the past are important, through the process of conducting interviews there will also need to be attention given to temporal questions which explore the past as well as events which occur while participation is ongoing. In this sense, interviews in this study sought to understand temporal changes in the past, as well as the unfolding present and the unknown and imagined future (Clandinin & Connelly, 2006, p.485). In the end, four interviews were conducted with Euryale, with each interview lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. Intervals between interviews were not decided in advance but also negotiated with Euryale around her availability and emotional state to take part in the interviews, something which also aided the study in maintaining relational ethics between Euryale and myself as researcher. The gap between interviews varied between two and four weeks, with the four interviews completed over a total period of approximately three months. All interviews were completed in person and recorded using a Dictaphone and also the recording function on the online meeting platform of Microsoft Teams, the latter also being used to provide initial transcripts of the interviews.

Questions to elicit Euryale's narratives aligned with those discussed by Butina (2015, p.192). Open questions which encouraged storytelling were used, for example "can you tell me about…" These questions were broad enough to allow Euryale to

provide detailed storied responses, with further probing questions used to explore particular elements of the stories.

Data Analysis: turning field texts into research texts

Moving from field texts to research texts involved a collaborative process of analysis and representation. Following Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) guidance, the research texts were crafted through the overlapping process of narrative restorying and identifying narrative threads. Efforts were also made to ensure a layered representation of the stories being told through a combination of Euryale's narrative, my researcher reflections, and interpretive commentary to acknowledge the multiple voices, identities, and positionalities involved in meaning-making.

Narrative restorying

Narrative restorying involved reorganising field texts into temporally sequenced stories that retained Euryale's voice and contextual richness (Riessman, 2008). Rather than fragmenting the data into discrete codes or categories, the stories were composed in ways that honored the continuity, complexity, and relational nature of Euryale's experiences. This process involved repeated readings of the texts, repeated listening to the audio recordings, mapping narrative timelines, and identifying key plot points (e.g., turning points, moments of identity negotiation, or resistance). Euryale was actively involved in reviewing and revising these stories, ensuring that the accounts remained faithful to their intentions and meanings. Following each conversational interview, the transcript for each meeting was read through and reviewed for potential narrative threads. At the beginning of the next interview, Euryale was then invited to look at the annotated transcript and check whether the identified threads which formed their story were accurate to their own experiences. This step was framed as an opportunity for them to take ownership of their story, highlighting aspects that were felt to be most significant and identifying any points that they felt had been misunderstood or overemphasised. For example, after the first interview I had noted a point about

Euryale's school potentially lacking around LGBTQ+ inclusion, based on one of Euryale's answers to a question. However, when she reviewed this thread, Euryale wished to clarify that it had not been her intention to convey this sense and so the thread was amended to better reflect her lived experience.

This iterative process continued throughout the interview process, helping to contribute to the drafting of a narrative account which sought to retain Euryale's voice. Part of this involved a timeline activity (Appendix D) which aided in sequencing key events and their associated meaning. Discussions with Euryale around this draft were intended to ensure that the narrative being formed was reflective of her experiences and aligned with the resonance they held. This co-construction process often prompted deeper reflection, as Euryale reconsidered how they wanted their experiences to be understood by others.

The final narrative was therefore not a researcher-produced account, but a negotiated text, developed through cycles of feedback and revision. Euryale's active participation in restorying ensured that her perspective was embedded not only in the content of the narrative but also in its interpretive framing. This collaborative approach also helped to maintain the ethical and epistemological commitments of narrative inquiry by positioning Euryale as co-author of her stories and by recognising knowledge as relational, co-constructed, and situated within shared meaning-making.

Identifying narrative resonances

Following Clandinin's (2013) approach to narrative analysis, the stories were examined for resonances, recurring motifs, tensions, metaphors, and patterns that emerged across time and context. Rather than seeking generalisable themes, the analysis focused on resonances that illustrated how Euryale's sense of self was shaped within the dynamic interplay of relationships, institutional norms, emotions, and physical spaces. For example, repeated imagery around invisibility and visibility in different spaces emerged in different contexts – online spaces, classroom dynamics,

peer interactions, and uniform policies - suggesting a broader pattern of negotiation around being seen and recognised.

Lines of flight

Within the broader framework of assemblage theory (DeLanda, 2016), lines of flight represent vectors of change, escape, and transformation which can be seen as pathways through which an assemblage breaks down, mutates, or reconfigures into something new. These lines disrupt stability, unsettle boundaries, and allow for the emergence of the new.

As previously mentioned, assemblage theory conceptualises the world as composed of dynamic, heterogeneous groupings, or 'assemblages', which include both human and non-human elements (bodies, texts, technologies, affects, ideas, etc.). These assemblages are always in a process of becoming (a concept discussed further in the following section) and can be held together temporarily but are never fixed. As part of this thinking, lines of flight are the forces or trajectories which cut through these assemblages, allowing them to deterritorialise (disassemble or lose coherence) and reterritorialise (reconfigure or reform).

Rather than being mere exits or escapes, lines of flight are often productive. They are routes of transformation, ways in which something becomes something else. They can emerge from tension, desire, contradiction, or rupture, essentially any force that unsettles an assemblage's current configuration.

As discussed, the research itself can also be considered a form of assemblage and therefore lines of flight may be seen within it. A line of flight in the context of this research might include a moment of disruption in a research process that shifted my focus as the researcher. Alternatively, it could be an unexpected connection between seemingly unrelated data or concepts, or a breakdown of conventional methods that gives rise to new ways of thinking or feeling.

However, lines of flight are not inherently liberatory and while they can lead to creative flourishing they can also precipitate violent collapse. Thus, engaging with them in research demands attunement to affect, ethical sensitivity, and a political awareness of what is being deterritorialised and toward what ends.

Conceptualisation of lines of flight within this study came both during the interview process and as a tool which complemented the identification of narrative threads. As I listened to Euryale narrate her experiences, there were moments which shone as instances of potential possibility, ones which challenged existing assemblages in her life. When these were narrated as part of her story, picturing a line of flight appearing and attending to it by seeing where it progressed, aided in guiding further probing questions in the interview. Using the concept of lines of flight during data analysis also acted as a complementary approach to the process of identifying narrative threads, as both concepts seek to follow experiences as they occur across the temporality of the stories being told. For example, lines of flight created by Euryale engaging in online community spaces aided in the identification of community as a narrative thread which ran through her storied experiences.

Identity as becoming

Central to understanding the experiences of Euryale was the concept of *becoming*, which rejects fixed or stable identities in favour of understanding subjectivity as always in process, shifting, negotiating, and emerging through interactions with others, institutions, and environments.

In the context of this research *becoming* is not treated as a journey toward a predetermined or coherent self, but as an ongoing negotiation of selfhood in relation to intersecting forces such as gender norms, educational policies, peer dynamics, family relations, and bodily practices. Viewing it as such allowed me as the researcher to attend to the complex ways in which Euryale's identity is co-constituted through both affirming and constraining assemblages.

It was felt that the temporal and fluid nature of *becoming* was particularly suited as part of the narrative inquiry methodological approach of this study. Stories told by Euryale were not taken as static representations of experience but as active sites of meaning-making, sites where Euryale narrated herself into being. The stories reveal how Euryale's gendered subjectivity is continually formed through affective encounters, institutional responses, and shifting social configurations.

In practical terms, this meant approaching the data not simply for thematic extraction but for mapping affective intensities, disruptions, alliances, and material-discursive entanglements that shaped Euryale's lived experiences. As interviews progressed, moments which seemed to signal a potential, perceived, or tangible instance of becoming were held in mind and attended to through further probing questions to elicit deeper narration of the story being told. For instance, becoming trans in school was not merely about asserting a gender identity but involved a multiplicity of assemblages: moments when Euryale discussed her school uniform; the administrative forms which followed her Mum contacting the school to arrange a meeting about Euryale coming out; instances of different teacher responses which Euryale reported; the way that Euryale discussed the impact of her friendships; description of evolving changing room access; and the initial process of initiating family conversations regarding her gender identity. Similarly, becoming outside school took on different contours. Spaces of possibility and resistance emerged as Euryale described accessing online spaces, her attendance at queer specific youth groups, or even moments of solitude.

By framing identity as becoming, this study resists the urge to pin down Euryale's experience into a coherent narrative arc. Instead, it embraces multiplicity, contradiction, and transformation as integral to understanding trans youth subjectivities. Through holding in mind the concept of becoming, narrative threads which were seen during data analysis around Euryale's emerging and shifting identities could also be deepened. Assemblage theory, and the concept of becoming, thus offered a powerful methodological lens to honour the complexity and fluidity of transgender lived experience in narrative research. Rather than using these conceptual

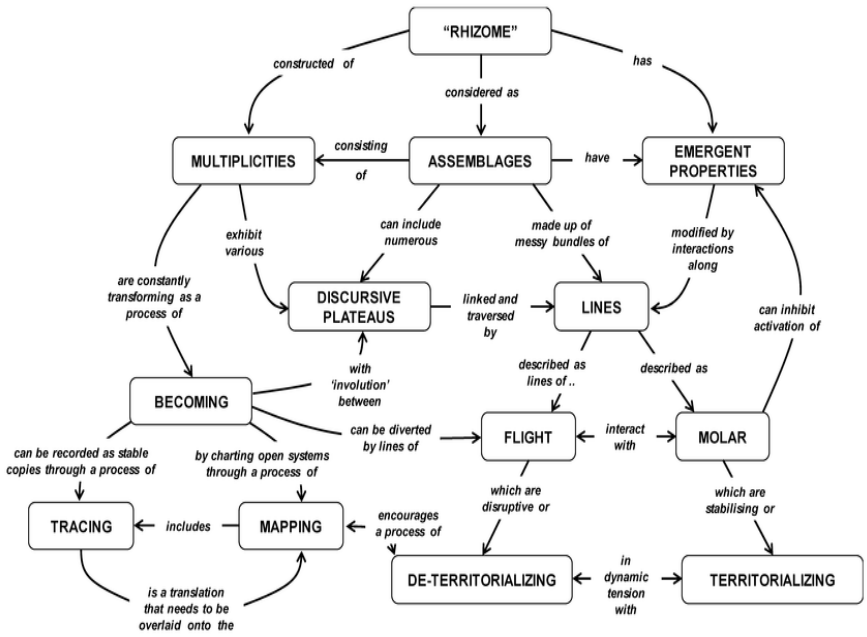
guides as a formulaic method, they instead privilege theoretical perspectives and analytic flexibility in a way which aligns with St Pierre's (2020) description of post-qualitative inquiry which seeks to re-orient thought and experiment with creating new forms of thought and life.

Mapping the assemblages

To deepen the analysis of Euryale's experiences, I also incorporated a method of *mapping assemblages*. Mapping assemblages allowed me to attend to the more-than-human dimensions of Euryale's experiences, highlighting the fluid and contingent nature of identity, belonging, and power. It was loosely based on Kinchin and Gravett's (2020) method of concept mapping seen in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Kinchin & Gravett's (2020) Concept Map



Concept mapping is a means to better visualise the relationships between key elements of learning and understanding. In the context of this study, the assemblage

map was not merely a descriptive diagram, but an analytical tool that highlighted patterns, tensions, and movements within Euryale's identity formation. Kinchin and Gravett's (2020) model encourages an iterative and reflexive mapping process, in which connections could be re-drawn to capture emergent understandings.

By integrating assemblage theory with Kinchin and Gravett's concept mapping, the resulting maps which were generated (Appendix C) foregrounded the relationality of Euryale's identity development. It illustrated how her gendered self is continuously experienced through interactions with family, peers, school contexts, online communities, and wider sociocultural narratives. This approach provided a nuanced and empathetic way to visualise the lived complexity of becoming and being transgender, moving beyond static models of identity toward a more fluid and relational understanding.

In practice, this involved identifying and tracing the various elements, both human and non-human, that shaped and co-constituted Euryale's everyday realities. Through a close reading of interview transcripts, listening to interview audio recordings, my own field notes, and reflexive journaling, I identified key moments and sites of significance. These included the school changing rooms, classroom interactions, pronoun use, peer relationships, clothing choices, digital spaces, and home environments. Rather than treating these as static settings or isolated events, I mapped how they came together in dynamic assemblages that produced specific affects, opportunities, constraints, and subjectivities. Two examples of assemblage mapping guides can be found in Appendix C.

Visual mapping tools and conceptual diagrams were employed as analytic aids, helping to visualise the multiplicity of forces at play in any given encounter. This mapping process did not aim to simplify or categorise Euryale's experiences but rather to illuminate the complexity and movement inherent in them. For instance, the changing rooms were not merely a place of transit before a PE lesson, but a site where bodily autonomy, potential for surveillance, anxiety, and increasing resistance converged to shape how Euryale navigated gendered norms. Digital spaces were not

merely tool for education, but also space for escape, levity, developing understanding of self and a sense of community.

Importantly, this assemblage mapping was iterative and reflexive. As the narrative inquiry process unfolded, new assemblages emerged concurrently, and previously overlooked connections became apparent. This method allowed me to remain attuned to Euryale's own ways of sense-making while also foregrounding the socio-material conditions that co-construct experience. In doing so, mapping assemblages offered a nuanced, relational understanding of what it means to live and be recognised as a transgender young person in and out of school.

Ensuring Quality and Rigour

While working with qualitative and post-qualitative research methodologies felt important within the context of this research to sufficiently capture the messy, unexpected and dynamic elements of the stories being narrated, it was also important to ensure that the study retained the necessary levels of quality and rigour. To satisfy these necessary requirements, I was mindful to pay attention to the twelve 'touchstones' which underpin narrative inquiry. These touchstones are key guiding principles developed by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) to shape and evaluate narrative inquiry research. They help ensure rigour, relational depth, and authenticity. These touchstones are not prescriptive rules but rather ethical and methodological commitments that ensure the inquiry remains rooted in experience, relationship, and reflexivity (Finlay and dela Cruz, 2023). Within this study, these touchstones acted as a guide for the research in the following ways:

Attending to Relational Commitments: The relationship between myself as researcher and Euryale was central. Care was taken to build trust and to co-create a respectful, safe space for the sharing of personal experiences. Euryale was involved as a co-inquirer, contributing to decisions about what stories were shared and how they were represented.

Inquiring into Experience: This research focused on lived experience, drawing on views of experience as continuous and interactive. Euryale's stories provided insight into how gender identity, school practices, peer relationships, and family dynamics shaped her educational journey and sense of self.

Narrative Thinking: Rather than categorising data thematically, the study maintained a narrative mode of analysis, preserving the integrity and flow of Euryale's storied experiences. The emphasis was placed on temporality, context, and the unfolding of meaning over time.

Attending to the Three-Dimensional Narrative Inquiry Space: Euryale's stories were explored through the dimensions of **t**emporality (past, present, future), sociality (personal and social conditions), and place (the physical and contextual locations of experience). This framework supported a nuanced understanding of Euryale's life both within and outside of school.

Negotiation of Research Purposes: The focus of the research was discussed with Euryale and her parent at the outset. Euryale was invited to shape the direction of the conversations and the selection of narratives to be included in the final representation.

Being Wakeful: Throughout the research, I remained alert to the complexities and tensions inherent in Euryale's experiences. This wakefulness extended to moments of quiet reflection, contradiction, and emotion within the narrative and the research relationship itself.

Narrative Beginnings: My own experiences and positioning as a researcher were made explicit. I kept an ongoing research journal (Appendix E) and engaged in regular supervision to try and reflect on how my own identity, assumptions, and experiences shaped my approach to the inquiry (Clandinin, 2013).

Negotiation of Entry and Exit: Entry into Euryale's life was negotiated carefully, ensuring informed consent as an ongoing and dynamic process. The process of ending the research relationship was similarly relational and respectful, including a shared debrief and follow-up correspondence.

Being Responsive to the Particulars: The study was attentive to the unique circumstances, language, and identity of Euryale. Her voice was privileged in the construction and representation of the research texts.

Emphasis on Stories to Live By: Identity was understood in narrative terms. Euryale's stories were explored as expressions of her evolving identity which intersected with the institutional narratives of schooling, gender, and adolescence (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999).

Closely Attending to the Tensions: Tensions, such as those between Euryale's self-understanding and the institutional responses she sometimes encountered, were not smoothed over but examined as sites of meaning-making and identity negotiation.

Committing to Sustained Concern with Participants' Well-being: Ethical responsibility extended beyond the conclusion of data collection. Euryale was involved in making decisions around anonymity, was given the opportunity at the beginning of each interview to share how she has feeling since the previous meeting and was provided with regular debriefing materials.

By adhering to these touchstones, the research tried to honour the complexity of Euryale's lived experiences and uphold the ethical and relational integrity that narrative inquiry strives for. These touchstones served not as rigid rules but as ethical and methodological anchors in the relational and contextual world of narrative inquiry.

Euryale's Story

Prelude to the first meeting

It's a cold, dark afternoon in early February as I wait in the library foyer for Euryale ahead of our first interview. Having offered her the choice of conducting the interviews in a variety of different spaces (at school, at the youth group she attends, in person, at a neutral public space such as a local library) I have been thinking about her choice to undertake the interviews in the latter location. In considering the *place* aspect of Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional research space, a space I was about to step into alongside Euryale, I had written in my field notes journal about how the physical space may or may not impact the stories being told. The library is a space commonly associated with positive LGBTQ+ representation in the local area, becoming a focal point for yearly Pride celebrations and activities, along with holding frequent exhibitions and the housing a LGBT History Archive. Would it bring greater freedom for Euryale in narrating her stories by having these discussions away from the main site of their experiences (school)?

The library has, however, also been the sight of more recent tumult around LGBTQ+ representation and accessibility. There have been protests in recent months around 'Drag Storytime' events and the removal of a 'trans friendly space' poster following complaints from individuals who hold gender-critical views. This was an issue which the leader of the local council gave comment on, highlighting the potential macrosystemic influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1997) on the experiences of young people such as Euryale. This latter incident led to much media scrutiny and a protest in support of retaining spaces such as the library as 'safe spaces' for LGBTQ+ people and other marginalised demographics. As I look out from the relative warmth of the foyer to the darkening skies above the windswept steps outside, I picture this latter protest, the hundreds of people present, and the short, impromptu speech I gave. I spoke about the importance of preserving library spaces as a means for younger LGBTQ+ people to learn about those who came before them, something which had been vital in my own journey of understanding and exploring my queerness and gender identity and aligns with queer

theory perspectives on the importance of documenting LGBTQ+ history as acts of both historical artefact and an evocation of resistance (Morland and Willox, 2005. This is an early example of the entanglements discussed in the researcher positionality section of this empirical chapter, something I noted in my field journal when I wrote about:

> *"the importance of the reflexive process in trying to allow the young person's stories to be the initial guide, while acknowledging how they are situated in the past, present and future of both themselves and I." (Research journal entry, 06.02.25)*

It feels fitting in many ways that conversations about Euryale's experiences are taking place in this space, but I am also wondering for how long such spaces will retain a sense of safety for the local LGBTQ+ community. The area where the library is located has a long history, dating back to the medieval period, of being a site for public meeting and debate. Yet I notice the feeling of sadness that one of the main public discourses at the present time seems to be a debate about the right of a minority section of society to live their lives peacefully and without infringement on their rights.

Having spent several months working on the literature review chapter of this study, I have also been writing reflections in my field journal ahead of this first interview about the impact of reading so much literature which alludes, directly or indirectly, to negative experiences for LGBTQ+ young people. It has felt challenging at points to read about the difficult experiences of these young people along with the real-time news updates about various policy changes, most recently in December 2024 a permanent ban on the prescribing of puberty blockers to young people under the age of eighteen (British Medical Journal, 2024). Will this be a piece of news which has impacted Euryale? At this stage I am not aware of her gender identity or how they identify in terms of their sexuality, just that they are part of the LGBTQ+ community. Having read so much negativity about how LGBTQ+ young people have experienced life both in and out of school (e.g. Harris et al., 2021; McGowan et al., 2022; Horton, 2023), I have found myself talking in meetings with my research supervisor about how this is impacting my own wellbeing, and that I am holding some hope that Euryale's story might be different. However, what if it is not? These reflections, and the recognition that many elements

impart influence on the stories of Euryale and how I will hopefully begin to make meaning of them with her, brings to mind the following quote from dela Cruz (2014) about the initial steps of walking into the midst of a participant's stories:

> *"At the beginning of the relationship, both the researcher and participant bring into the field experiences that are embedded in a greater context of time, place, personality and sociality. Even at the first meeting, walking into the midst of stories, each person's stories of past, present and future influence each other's storytelling, and the inquiry process that occurs in the researcher-participant relationship." (p.57)*

As I continue to wait for Euryale, I realise that I do not actually know who I am looking out for. She had contacted me via email to express her interest in taking part in the research and we had communicated via email during the process of getting informed consent forms signed and arranging this first interview. I knew one of her parents would be accompanying her to and from the interview, as per a stipulation I had included if the interviews were taking place in a location which wasn't at school or a youth group. Yet as it was after school time on a Friday, there were several young people walking around with parents or carers, perhaps returning from school or heading into the city for an early dinner or end of the week shopping trip.

At that moment, a young person walks into the foyer with their Mum and heads towards me. She has the hood of her winter coat pulled up, but I recognise her as one of the young people who attends a local LGBTQ+ youth group and who was present when I went to speak to the group about participating in the research. I had previously helped facilitate some of these youth group sessions, but Euryale had begun attending as I was ending my own involvement and so the overlap had been brief. Still, I wondered about whether some element of recognisability had been a factor in Euryale deciding to take part in the research, or whether my own transgender identity had also played a part. It was in these initial relational moments, as I plugged in to the research assemblage (comprised of, amongst many elements, myself, Euryale, the location chosen for the interviews, how Euryale had chosen to present herself, her parent being present, the literature I had been reading in advance) that I began to confirm my thinking that I could

not hope to view myself as a detached observer in this research, and must acknowledge my role as an active participant in the meaning-making of the stories which would be discussed (Holmes, 2020).

After introductions, confirmation of when her Mum should collect her, and a discussion about the overview of the research and whether Euryale is still happy to take part, which she confirms she is, Euryale and I make our way to the small meeting room which I have booked for the interview. We make small talk on the way, Euryale sharing how her day at school was and that the traffic was quite bad on the way in hence being slightly late. She comes across as perhaps slightly nervous, but still polite and friendly in her demeanour and once we are in the room waits patiently while I check that the Dictaphone and transcription programme are both working as they should. We begin the interview, and Euryale appears to relax as we begin talking about the item which she has brought with her which represents inclusion for her. Euryale shares some of her experiences relating to her emerging identity to this point, and this leads to a moment which I felt was revelatory in the context of the conversation and the wider research. I wished to share this at this point as it felt integral to understanding all three elements of the three-dimensional research space (temporal, social, situational) in which Euryale's stories reside:

> *Euryale: I came out to my best friend on the 15th of May [2024] and then I came out to another one of my friends who was like a pretty vocal trans ally, and like trans questioning on the 28th of July 2024, so. And then. Then I came out to one, one person in August and then in October was when I got started. Like coming out more, more publicly to like close friends. And then my parents on my 15th birthday. This is this. This is still last year and then. December. Like November, December time is when I started coming out to like the last friends in my friend group and. January. Tuesday, January this year is when I came out, is when I officially came out to my school. And as of last Tuesday. Then I'm officially…I was official. I'm now officially out.*

In the above quote, the temporal nature of Euryale's coming out as trans can be seen in the fact that this occurred across different moments over a period of several months. We also discussed the symbolism of a birthday in terms of coming out to her parents; a date which for many offers a moment of reflection on the passing of time, but also a moment to enact changes in one's life. In a society characterised by cisnormativity and where gender is often, rigidly, mapped onto biological sex, for trans people a birthday can also act as a reminder that the gender they were assigned when they entered this world no longer aligns with the person they are today. If that person is also not yet 'out', it can contribute to, or exacerbate, feelings of dysphoria. Euryale's quote also highlights the continual temporality of coming out for LGBTQ+ people in that it is, rarely, a one-off moment of disclosure. Across different relationships, variations of the same conversation must occur, whether through choice or being forced upon the person as they enter different contexts (new jobs, a new school, new social situations, etc) (Ali & Mothar, 2020; Hartley, 2021). As I wrote in a research journal entry after the interview in which this quote was shared:

> *"in terms of the evolving process of 'coming out' that we must do as LGBTQ+ people; whether overtly telling people or through responding to, sometimes unwanted, questions, or more subtly through how you present and carry yourself in different spaces and contexts to convey identity more implicitly. I wonder to what extent Euryale still needs to engage in a process of 'code switching' or whether this has become less of a concern since coming out at school?" (Research journal entry, 07.02.25)*

This also accounts for some of the situational element of Euryale's coming out as she engages in conversations with friends (perhaps in a neutral location, their house, another social environment, etc), her parents (at home) and finally within her school setting. The quote also begins to illustrate the social aspects of coming out through Euryale's reference to the different relationships which seem to be prioritised in terms of the 'order' in which she came out to people.

In this moment at the time, however, my predominant thoughts and feelings are ones of astonishment about the fact that Euryale has only been out at school for less than two weeks. Given the timescales of when she contacted me via email to express an interest in participating in the research, I realise that at that time, she would not have been 'fully' out at school. I am struck by the thought that, viewed from a narrative inquiry methodology perspective, Euryale has only recently narrated herself into existence and in this moment she does so again. I begin wondering about what her motivation was, and is, for wishing to partake in this research at a time when she is already in the midst of such a big moment in her life. However, as I later reflect in my research journal, perhaps the timing of this first interview worked well. Having recently come out at school, maybe achieving this milestone has resulted in increased confidence, and potentially a sense of freedom, which results in a less guarded or unsure response. As I also write in my research journal as part of the same entry:

> *"I am struck by Euryale's openness; how she was able to articulate some of her experiences and stories thus far. I certainly feel humble, and quite emotional, to hear Euryale's stories, especially ones so recent, told firsthand and to be a person that Euryale feels she can trust to share her life stories with." (Research journal entry, 07.02.25)*

I take a breath after Euryale's sharing of her coming out timeline to date and, in accordance with consideration of the importance of ethics of care in qualitative research (Reich, 2021), offer Euryale some words of affirmation in recognising what a big milestone in her life this potentially may have felt, and give my own congratulations. I am aware, though, that this process is likely to have been an emotionally charged one and I wish to begin opening space for Euryale to share some of the feelings which she has experienced as part of her stories. The following quote from Euryale was the second moment in quick succession during our first meeting when the scale, possibilities, and importance of effectively telling her story began to really sink in:

> *Euryale: Like scared at first. Like. Definitely. I was like, terrified for like the first… Really all the way up until like October that year, I was like terrified that like…I*

should…like I was just terrified that things would change…even if people don't like, hate me. If, like, there'll definitely be, like, a change in, like, how they view me. But there really kind of…wasn't. Aside from just like them now viewing me as a woman, there wasn't, they don't like…they didn't view me as a different person, which I was scared of. So, it was good. And then gradually I came out to more people, I started getting more confident, not not just in coming out, but just in general. I've been, been a lot more confident recently. And then….so it got less scary over time. It's still scary, but it got less scary…it got, it got better and and… Like basically every time I came out to someone, I'd just be like really happy for like a week afterwards. Like well, more than a week actually in some cases. And so OK, so it's like I just got like way more happy basically every time I came out to someone and then yeah [pause of approximately 10 seconds]. Because like the first, I kind of let it get to like a breaking point where like I kind of had to come out or just like, I felt like I'd never come out and it'd just be terrified forever. And that you have to let it go to that point at first. But then like now, then, towards the end, I was like I came out because I wanted to not because I had to.

This moment was one which was full, for both Euryale and me, with what Ringrose and Renold (2014) refer to as 'affective intensity'. A level of emotion and energy in this exchange which is difficult to capture through mere words in a transcript, but which nonetheless acts to propel me forward as I step into midst of Euryale's story and plug into the different assemblages of her life including, now, her place in the research assemblage. While *what* Euryale says here is important, and will be discussed further, I share this quote at this juncture instead to recognise how its affective meaning sparks fascination, exhilaration, suspense and intensity (MacLure, 2013, p.173). In doing so, I begin to engage in a research process which MacLure (2013) discusses as being about spending time focussing on how research data, "creates a sense of wonder – where data glows for the researcher in various moments of fieldwork, analysis, and beyond." (p.172-173). I think about my own coming out story and the emotions associated with it. How the lines of flight it opened acted to deterritorialise the existing assemblages of my life and allow for the emergence of something new, something which ultimately contributed to my own existence within the current research

assemblage. The exhilaration of this moment's affective meaning further solidified my existing desire to do justice to Euryale's stories, and reflect on how facilitating her in telling her stories may lead to the research assemblage creating further lines of flight and deterritorialising other assemblages which she plugs into (school, home, etc.) I think about the temporal aspect of when this quote occurred, how moving outwards in the three-dimensional research space (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) to view the social context of Euryale's experiences reveals a system where many adults are talking about trans young people and their lives, yet few people seem to be willing to create opportunities to experience the same affective intensity which characterised the above moment. As I move from stepping into Euryale's story to sitting in the midst of it (dela Cruz, 2014) I wonder what other affective moments may occur which could contribute to what Ferguson (2024) refers to as a "sustained understanding and empathy of young people's experiences" (p.117), something which often seems lacking in the discourse around the experiences of trans young people. Moving back inwards in the three-dimensional research space, I also wonder what experiences and associated emotions Euryale may have gone through to reach the place where she came out because she wanted to, not because she had to.

Sitting in the midst of the story

During the initial part of our time together conducting interviews, Euryale tells me about her early school experiences. Attending a relatively small primary school, it was not one where LGBTQ+ representation featured with any degree of prominence, whether in terms of having contact with other LGBTQ+ people or seeing these topics covered as part of the curriculum:

> *Euryale: In in my primary school, there weren't really many queer people at least like people didn't know they were queer. Yeah, actually, there were a lot of queer people, but, like, not at the time. No one. Really. There was, like, one gay person. I was like, close friends with. But that was really it. We weren't really taught about like, LGBTQ issues and struggles and like identities and etcetera.*

While guidance for schools in the United Kingdom states that pupils are expected to have been taught about LGBT content at a timely point as part of the Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) curriculum, it is at the discretion of schools themselves as to how they do this (Department for Education, 2021). This level of discretion has the potential to exacerbate existing cis-and-heteronormative systems which limit the exposure to a curriculum which positively conveys the diversity and potential possibilities of relationships and identity, creating issues not just for pupils but also for teachers (Carlile, 2020). While Euryale speaks about the relatively positive, or at least neutral, experience of the one openly gay person who she recalled from her time at primary school, it feels telling that it is a lack of education, rather than any sense of innate hostility, which she believes informs usage of pejorative language by others towards the other pupil in question, and I wonder whether this would have been different if they had a broader awareness of diverse relationship types as part of fostering greater inclusion:

> *Euryale: I can't remember anyone who was, like, openly hostile. There were people who were, like, ignorant, but, like, still very much in the mindset of, like, use gay as an insult type thing. But, like, they were more…I would say they're more uneducated. They were more uneducated than inherently, like, being cruel or anything.*

Euryale also reflects that people at her primary school did not know that they were queer and qualifies this during further discussion that there were people in her primary school, and indeed in the first two years of secondary school, who would come out and identify as a range of different sexualities. Euryale herself says that during her time at primary school, "there's nothing I can particularly remember really which influenced my journey" although as our discussions continue, she elaborates on the emerging, shifting nature of her own identity, along with those of her peers, as they progress from primary school into secondary school and from childhood to early adolescence.

This discussion of identity as being shaped over time, in context, and in relation to others is important in challenging more dominant cultural narratives that 'authentic' trans identities must manifest in early childhood, for example, the narrative that, "I

always knew that I was different". Such perspectives privilege a linear, coherent life story which can be seen to align with essentialist conceptions of identity development, particularly around gender. For those whose sexuality and gender identity develops at a later age, including my own (coming out as queer in my 20s and then as a trans in my early 30s), such conceptions marginalise such experiences and delegitimise the temporal fluidity of identity as being able to be explored and continually narrated and re-narrated over time. This is particularly true for identity development in adolescence, a period characterised by social, bodily and emotional transformation, as young people often begin to access for the first time new relational and discursive resources which allow them to explore and articulate previously unavailable identities.

It is also possible in these instances to view adolescence as a form of *transitional assemblage* where new components such as hormonal changes, shifting social roles, and different cultural discourses on queerness can act as a catalyst for the becoming of gendered subjectivities. By foregrounding the idea that gender and sexuality identities emerge contingently, it is possible to deterritorialise existing identity assemblages through the emergence of new configurations. While Euryale and her peers may not have known they were queer and/or trans when they were younger, this could be because the necessary elements were not present or sufficiently assembled, such as language, support systems or exposure to representation. When these components become part of existing assemblages, as is the case for Euryale when she progresses into secondary school, lines of flight can frequently be seen which open space and create possibilities for the deterritorialisation of assemblages hitherto constrained by cisnormative and heteronormative narratives (Puar, 2007; Preciado, 2019).

New beginnings and false starts: plugging into the secondary school assemblage

Euryale's start at secondary school was a tentative but generally positive one. Moving from a small primary school with single-form entry to a significantly larger secondary school brought with it the usual adjustments that most pupils of this age go

through, such as apprehension, cautious excitement, and some sense of potential possibility. For Euryale, although she tells me that it is wasn't until "Year 8 or Year 9 that other people really started coming out", she reflects that there was still a felt sense that her new school was a place where acceptance of diversity was, in many ways, more a part of the existing school climate, telling me that, "the school had a lot more of a definitive, like, acceptance of queer identities." We discuss this sense more, and I ask Euryale if she can tell me a bit more about some the things which she feels may contribute to this feeling of greater acceptance:

> *Euryale: Because we have that aforementioned, we have that LGBT society. I cannot remember when that, if that was set up in year seven or if it was in Year 8. But I was like, that's been around for as long as I can remember caring about it. And we have, we have like this thing. 'XXXX'. That was a campaign that our school did. It was about, like, sexual harassment, discrimination and bullying, and particularly discrimination against …and that kind of highlighted inclusion. That, that kind of didn't really backfire but like no one took it seriously because again, the name! [laughs]. No one really uses that in speech, especially at our age, so it's kind of just like a way that they seem like they're really trying to relate to kids, but like failing. But from their intentions it's definitely a very good thing and also definitely helps inclusion, so.*
>
> *Tegan: In what ways do you think it's helping?*
>
> *Euryale: Well, even though like very few people actually take it seriously, if we did, it would have given us a safe space to, like, report discrimination because we have this application called XXXX, which was a way to like report sexual harassment, discrimination and bullying, so it would probably definitely helped. It definitely would have helped if if if I. If I'd used that. I don't know anyone who had used it. So I choose to believe that kind of petered out and then didn't really amount to much but like. It definitely in theory gave a good space for like a way to report discrimination. And like, promote inclusion, yeah.*

In her reflections, Euryale begins to touch on feelings of LGBTQ young people in other studies, for example Harris et al. (2021), who report a feeling that policies linked to inclusion are often viewed as being in some way tokenistic or performative in nature and not being taken seriously or viewed with any meaningful significance. Euryale goes on to share other examples of her school's attempts at overt LGBTQ inclusion:

> *Euryale: Like the teachers have, like, relatively, like they've strict anti-homophobic bullying, transphobic bullying, kind of policies. But like there's still some that slips through the cracks to my knowledge, but, like, it's they do well. They do their best. So, there's that. Hmm, there are also. There are also a few LGBTQ plus teachers at our school. To my knowledge, there's Mrs. XXXX. Mrs. XXXX is a lesbian. Miss XXXX is a lesbian and Mx XXXX is non-binary. But like they're all I can remember. Also, our Head of year wore an ally Pride badge and like. They've got a few like posters around the school of, like, stop homophobic bullying. That kind of thing.*

One of the thoughts I have when re-reading Euryale's description of her school's inclusion initiatives is about my own time at school. Accessed entirely under the shadow of Section 28 legislation, I wonder what my time at school would have been like, and how my own identity may have been shaped, had I seen visible representations of LGBTQ acceptance or had any awareness that any of my teachers held diverse sexualities. What lines of flight may have been created in my own identity assemblages had the conditions been present to allow for these possibilities to emerge? And yet, as I write in my research journal later, I also retained a sense that Euryale's school's attempts at inclusion seem like the tip of the iceberg. Perhaps this is a projection on my part, given that I have spent several months reading about the negative experiences of LGBTQ young people at school, particularly young trans people. I wonder what Euryale's school is doing, and what they did, to actively support and protect her when she came out? It is one thing to provide visibility for others, but when Euryale herself becomes visible, what will this look like? Still, at this moment, Euryale's experiences of these initiatives are felt as positive and affirming:

Euryale: It's nice knowing that like there are adults that are like. That have been in similar situations like similar identities to us.

This positive representation of older LGBTQ identities speaks to the queer theory perspective that recording and highlighting the lived experience of previous generations of LGBTQ people forms an important component of supporting the developing identities of future generations. For Euryale, the initiatives of her school are potentially acting as a foundational building block of safety within her school environment. This felt sense of safety is a prerequisite stage in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, coming before the positive attainment of psychological needs relating to sense of belonging, friendships, and identity development.

Entanglements with the online assemblage

As the story of Euryale's secondary school experience continues, there is another story bumping up against it which is beginning to shape her becoming. Sensing that she holds some semblance of internal difference, as she discusses this period in her story there is an affective energy in the interview of Euryale feeling lost in some way, of her trying to follow a thread but not being entirely confident of where it may lead. As she tells me:

Euryale: my school is very like cis-het white dominated like cis-het white men, women dominated. So, it's like I didn't really…I didn't really get that much, that many chances to interact with queer people outside my immediate friend group, and that's why I really turned to online spaces, so I can like just gage what like other queer people experienced. And then. My…and so I just like…not getting enough, really, in person, social interaction with other queer people probably hindered my, like, realising. But I did realise fairly early on, I think I was like 12. No, I was 13 when I realised when I like, realised for the first time I don't have a specific date of when I thought started thinking I was trans and started like knowing I was trans. The only thing I really have a specific date on is when I came

out to my to my best friend for the first time. But like it was around 2022 to 2023 sort of time that when I started realising.

As Euryale plugs into this new assemblage of the online space, I ask her what she feels the significance of accessing these spaces was for her at the time:

Euryale: especially early on in transition like before I was out to anyone that was really how I like learnt about like…just my sense of, like, what the trans community was because, like, it was before I really knew many trans people. I knew, like a couple, but not like that personally. Um, so it kind of informed my like perception of like just trans people as a whole.

In this moment, as Euryale begins to develop her perception of the trans identity, we see a major line of flight opening up as her entanglements in the online space expose new possibilities which disrupt the existing assemblage of her identity. From a narrative inquiry perspective, I also wonder about the situational element of this new entanglement. Euryale attending school and engaging in these spaces are occurring within the same temporality, yet I wonder how it might feel to be accessing these new positive experiences in a 'remote' space while continuing to exist in a physical space where these experiences are, at the time, much less present. This dichotomy can be seen as a type of counter-story, a cross-cutting assemblage which has the potential to significantly deterritorialise the assemblage of Euryale's existing identity. As Euryale and I talk further, she shares more about her forays into these online LGBTQ spaces:

Euryale: It it was more, it was more just like…like watching. Like there was like…I didn't really. I don't really like stuff and I don't post stuff, ever really. I don't really. And I don't, like, talk to people online that frequently unless in like very specific scenarios, mainly my friends. Uh but like. It was just like kind of like knowing that that, like other trans people are out there and like getting…it was before I was really friends with any and I didn't…I only really, I only really knew like one trans person my age and like I wasn't very close friends with them so. Yeah.

Euryale tells me about how she increasingly found herself relating to a variety of aspects within these trans online spaces, although it seems to be within an observational capacity and she herself elects to remain invisible rather than actively engaging herself:

> *Euryale: I just kind of end up resonating with like a lot of the like, what people, er, 'cause there's like a term in online trans communities, 'Egg', which is like before people realise they're trans uh. And I found like found myself resonating with a lot of the like things Eggs say like 'oh I if I could just be like a girl for one day I'd definitely try it and hands down to see what it's like' then, like, 'I'd go back, totally totally'. And then like and then I just like. And then I just started like realising like I relate to this like a weird amount. And then I just started to start realising, yeah, I'm probably trans. And then definitely trans. And then I started coming out. And stuff. And that's really how I figured myself out, you know?*

This interaction was another which was filled with a greater amount of affective intensity than is captured in the transcript alone. As she spoke, Euryale laughed at the language she was describing, almost as if narrating this experience out loud was breaking some form of tension. It felt in many ways as if in retelling these events, Euryale continues the process of becoming as she narrates her trans identity further. There is a sense of relief in the way Euryale recounts these events, perhaps re-experiencing some of the relief she experienced at the time at being able to access a discourse hitherto unknown. Perhaps relief in being able to recount these events from a place of being out. As this new discourse is engaged with, its intra-action with other elements of the assemblage (the electronic device she is using, the other people online, the content which is shown to Euryale via any existing algorithms, her existing knowledge which contributes to any search terms she may use, etc.) continues to disrupt other components of her identity assemblage (the language she has access to, how others view and speak about her, the clothes she chooses to wear, etc.). Speaking at the time of the interview, Euryale appears calm, assured and positive about this

period. Yet, given its relative recency, I ask her how she felt as she reached the point when she began considering coming out:

> *Euryale: It took me a while to feel ready to come out like, err, so it kind of…at first it was like very, very scary to me. And then I started, like I told my parents, that I that I like was trans. But then at the time, there's like, the point where I was like, not very sure on myself. So it kind of just I ended up like losing my confidence like getting cold feet halfway through and just like, oh, but I might go back on this later. So, I'll just say that I'm probably, I'm probably trans. Then I turn into I may be trans, and I turn into like probably not, but I might be, I don't know. And then just kind of, it got…it just got told it just got toned down into thinking like I was trans questioning. Like I wasn't 100% sure at the time. So, it's kind of me like just not like getting cold feet at the end. But yeah, and then to my best friend…I kinda had to come up twice to him because the first time I was like really again, it was…I was at fence sitting again. So, then I came out, but then eventually came out to him over a like voice message on my phone, and then it was like four minutes long. And then…everything went well.*

In this moment, there is a lingering sense of sadness as Euryale recounts the fear that she experienced which ultimately elongated her initial coming out experience and contributed to a level of self-doubt which made her qualify the narration of her trans identity with different caveats (“probably”, “maybe”, “I might be”, etc.) After the initial possibility created by her entanglement in the online space, plugging back into her existing identity assemblage spotlights a precariousness for Euryale. Caught between shifting assemblages as her stories overlap and bump against each other, this fear and “toning down” of the possibility which the line of flight holds highlights that the outcomes of certain intra-actions can be paused or diverted. This is discussed by Barad (2007), who points to the fact that intra-actions can be prone to discontinuity and that the opportunities created by lines of flight do not always progress in a continuous fashion.

Reterritorialising the assemblage of her school identity

The discontinuity described in the previous section appears in further discussion with Euryale as we talk about her shifting identity and how she navigated this between the different places and spaces in which she inhabits. As she speaks it brings to mind a metaphorical dance, the movements of which are constantly being amended, reconfigured, and updated depending on the audience. Having mentioned her school's LGBT society as something which she feels contributes to positive inclusive practices, she also told me that she had only actually attended for the first time "last Monday" which was shortly before our second interview. Was there something which had prevented her attendance prior to this? Euryale reports one potentially negative aspect of the club as follows:

> *Euryale: Since it is the…the library is closed pretty much like I think you're allowed in, but you're not supposed to. Like you don't really want to be gay, like taking out a library book with, like, a bunch of a bunch of, like, people screaming. So it's kind of like. You can't really go without outing yourself as like queer, even if you like, like basically you're just like, even if you weren't you'd basically just, you'd be perceived as queer by just going in by going there, which is like it's fine for me because I'm fine with being like perceived as queer by like other students. But there's no real like way for anyone to just go in and like. It's no, it's not. There's no way to just, like, be closeted and go there. You just have. You have to come out where you have to.*

This enforced outing or othering as being an aspect of school-based LGBT clubs is a common downside discussed in multiple other studies. Yet for Euryale, who describes being unbothered with being perceived as queer by other pupils, this outing does not seem to be the aspect creating a barrier to her attendance. I wonder therefore what was happening for Euryale in the period of flux between starting to think about her trans identity and attending the club? I ask her, "was the club something you wanted to attend but didn't feel able to?"

> *Euryale: I was able to go. I was able to go there before because I was identifying as bisexual. I've been doing that up until relatively recently because it was. It was just easier to like, just keep saying I'm bi rather than like, ducking out the last minute because I only realised, I was like a lesbian like right before I came out, so it would be weird just to be like 'oh guys, I'm actually not bi' and then like a week later, be like 'psych. I'm trans', so I was still identifying as bi up until very recently. And then so I could have gone, I just didn't really didn't want to at that time because like I couldn't have, I didn't feel ready to like share my like trans identity. So I just had to. Like I would have just been like perceived as just cis and bi by which like I didn't really feel like particularly. And then also I have other friends who aren't queer and didn't want to go to it. So I just, like, want to hang out with them more.*

This avoidance of a situation because of other's perceptions highlights the impact of the different relational entanglements which Euryale finds herself in. Lines of flight created by the accumulation of new discourses and knowledge around trans identities in her online community assemblage are somewhat discontinued when attempting to plug back into the assemblage of the school LGBT club. Euryale's shifting, fluid, evolving sexual and gender identities are a comparable phenomenon for many LGBTQ+ people, particularly in adolescence (Parker, 2016). However, as noted previously, even when there are inclusive practices being implemented within schools the overarching impact of binary constructions of identity, informed by cis-and-heteronormative views, can still prevail (Horton and Carlile, 2022). This can lead, as it appears to have done for Euryale, to some degree of restriction being placed upon any burgeoning exploration and expression of sexual and gender diversity.

I also wonder about how Euryale's developing awareness of, and relatedness with, trans identities in online spaces perhaps also including engagement with narratives which were less positive and whether this had contributed to some of her anxiety and reticence to share her emerging identity. As previously discussed, discourse about trans people has become increasingly polarised. Did she feel that

there were any negative aspects to viewing trans related content online, especially during her initial forays into those spaces? Euryale tells me:

> *Euryale: I think if you don't find a community, you might fall in with, like, crowds of transphobia or, like, like, there's some communities, like even trans communities on, like, especially, like, certain online spaces which are, like, kind of known for being, like, not great for trans people like that. Like, really obsessed with, like, passing. There's a lot of, like, you are only a real trans person if you're, like, if you medically transition or if you have medically transitioned. And, like, that's not. It's not great, but I managed to avoid that.*

I ask Euryale how she managed to avoid these spaces and how she knows they exist. She tells me that she found positive representations of trans identities first and that through engaging with these spaces, some of the people producing content use their platforms to warn against the "toxicity" of what seems like more binary, essentialist ideologies around trans identities. I am pleased for Euryale that she has not been exposed to the more negative elements of these online spaces but feel a sadness that she is even aware of them in the first place. I ask Euryale what she thinks the impact might be for someone who does end up seeing less positive and inclusive trans online spaces. She thinks about this, and it is one of the first times when her body language and general affect becomes noticeably sadder. She says:

> *Euryale: It like gives people, like, a really, like, an image of, like, if you don't pass you won't, like, you're worthless or you won't really be trans unless you pass and then medically transition like. The elitism of 'you're not really trans' it's, like, is not great. Like, I can't speak from, like, a mental health professional standpoint, but I know that that that, like, viewing yourself as like not really, not really a trans person could be like really damaging.*

Euryale's discussion of this privileging of certain trans identities is one which can be viewed as assimilationist in nature (Horton and Carlile, 2022). In this account, we see an example of how lines of flight created by new components in her identity assemblage, in this case discourses around trans identities, have the potential to not

be liberatory in nature, but lead to potential instances of violence. When thinking of the narrative threads in Euryale's story, I feel some sense of relief that this is one which was left hanging and does not seem to have weaved together with other elements of her now reterritorialised identity assemblage. Yet during further conversation around online spaces, Euryale talks about other aspects of trans related news and content which has had some impact on her. She tells me about articles she has read about the practice in some countries of sending trans women to male prisons and how, in some instances, this is used as a form of corrective punishment through sexual assault and rape. She speaks about checking YouTube and Reddit to "stay up to date" with trans issues in other countries, particularly America, where she says that "things are really bad". She mentions the recent ban on puberty blockers during one conversation and for a second it seems as if she is about to cry. In my research journal at the time of these conversations I wrote that I:

> *"found elements of Euryale's story very difficult to hear. How many other teenagers are aware, let alone able to eloquently talk about, some of the things she was talking about. What does this do to a young trans person's sense of self and sense of belonging?"*

I ask Euryale if she has done anything to mitigate the impact of reading about some of these issues? She tells me:

> *Euryale: Well, I check online spaces less now as I know more trans people in real life these days. Also, I want to feel bad about other people, but I don't want it to scare me. I want to help other people and spread awareness, but..it's hard not to be, like, 'oh I'm not scared' but I remind myself that America is far away.*

Euryale also tells me that a big aspect of the trans content she engages with possesses an element of levity. As she says herself, "it's about making bad stuff seem less threatening through the guise of humour." When I ask her if she can say more about this, Euryale tells me about how a big element of trans online content for her is through things such as memes ("it's usually a lot easier to stomach a thing if it has a

funny mouse drawn on it") which function as a way to manage things like difficult news items or one's dysphoria. I wonder as Euryale speaks, that for a demographic who are often positioned as victims, what does it mean to use humour to disempower some of these difficulties? To what extent does this indicate the degree of resilience that trans young people have the capacity to display? I also ask Euryale whether she ever talks about these issues with other people in her life and whether she feels those who are not trans should have more awareness of them? The sadness which was previously present shifts, and the affective intensity is one of conviction and calmness as Euryale replies:

> *Euryale: It's not every cis person's job to keep up with every trans issue. Maybe if people have a trans person if their life they should, like, stay up to date but not obsess over everything. Also, I wouldn't want a pity party every time someone in America says they don't like trans people. Feel bad for the people it's happening to!"*

Returning to the reterritorialising of her school identity, the sense Euryale had around not feeling ready to share her identity makes me recall my own journey around coming out as trans; how identifying as non-binary for a period of time felt in some way easier due to the ambiguity it provided. How I have left previous professional roles because it felt easier to do so than the other options of coming out or staying and continuing to experience daily instances of being perceived by others in a way which misaligned with how I saw myself. I ask Euryale during our interview why she felt that being openly bisexual and being perceived as queer felt less challenging to her than sharing her trans identity?

> *Euryale: Hmm well coming out as bisexual was way easier. And, like, I just can't deal with people misgendering me. Also, if someone says they're gay you can't just say 'you're wrong'. Well, you can but you just look stupid and homophobic, but it's more socially acceptable to say to a trans person, 'no you're not'. And people are less likely to challenge transphobia.*

Euryale's reflection that the delegitimisation of trans identities is more acceptable from a social perspective provides a further example of the macrosystemic impact on how trans young people explore, articulate, and express their gender identity. It also acts as a counter-story to the generally more positive aspects Euryale has previously spoken about regarding her school's attempts to promote positive inclusion. However, despite her significant reservations about how her trans identity would be perceived, "my biggest fear in terms of, like, others was people hating me", Euryale reached a point where a major instance of deterritorialisation in her school identity occurred and she came out as trans. Other research has discussed potential models for effectively supporting trans young people in their school setting, most notably Horton and Carlile (2022) who advocate for "trans-emancipatory approaches which ensure all trans pupils are genuinely able to access education on an equal footing to their cis peers" (p.184). With this in mind, I ask Euryale what the process of coming out at school was like for her. Euryale recounts:

> *Euryale: So, I got, I had a meeting with my head of year two weeks ago today. It was in the middle of art, so then I'm missing the last half hour. That kind of sucked, but anyway. Meeting with the head of the year when we discussed like the like kind of terms, not terms, but like what would happen when I like came out. So, they did a whole like year announcement like everyone in the everyone's form tutor on either Tuesday or then subclasses did on Wednesday like told their forms that like I was trans. I was hoping for a more elegant solution but like that's really the only way I could because like I don't really know how to do it for like just people that apply to me rather than just everyone. Like it's like I don't talk to them like a lot of people in my year. One of my close friends didn't know my last name, so they were going on about 'who?!' Like they didn't know who my dead name was. And then I just showed back up because I was going to get a drink of water and I came back and they were just like, 'wait, that's you?!' Because my friends had just told them and it was really funny. But yeah, there were just a lot of people who don't really know me, don't really know me in my year. So…but it was the best solution we could really come up with. People outside of me are just like if it's relevant to them, it will filter out so.*

I reflect later in my research journal about some of these procedural elements and how they feel, to paraphrase Euryale, inelegant. How much of the meeting with the Head of Year was directive from them and how much of that plan was co-constructed with Euryale? How would coming out as gay, or lesbian, or bisexual at her school be handled and would it be different to coming out as trans? However, I also wonder whether there was an element of having the burden of telling everyone being removed and whether this felt like a weight being lifted for her. I ask Euryale if she can share a little more about the school processes, including how the meeting came about and what it was like for her in starting to have those conversations. Euryale replies:

> *Euryale: My mum emailed my form tutor and my head of the year about it because they didn't actually know really what the exact process was, but my head of year like. Everything got sorted out. I wasn't really that involved in the setting up the meeting process, but then once the meeting was under way, my parents were there so they could like. They could they like help and ask any questions I've forgotten how. So, everything turned out well, right with the with the meeting. It was more just like. What I wanted from the school rather than like actually talking out, talking out like my life story. I, just, because I just didn't really feel the need to tell him everything. We, so we just talked about like the like, what we, what would happen. It took ages to book the meeting because we booked it at the start of term, which was like, but then it's like 3 weeks for the meeting to go to get underway. Uh, luckily it was like the day after, not the day after. It's the Monday. There was a. Uh, there was an assembly, and most form tutors just don't check their memos after the assembly because there's not time. So, we did it on Tuesday where most forms would check their memos. So. So it took a while for me to be able to come out to the school after I like wanted to but all in all, after everything went out cleanly. And now that it has happened, I'm happy.*

In Euryale's accounts about her school coming out process further lines of flight emerge from intra-actions between existing elements such as school policies, Euryale's timetable, when teachers usually check their memos, and new elements

which act to deterritorialise and reconfigure the wider assemblage, including her Mum emailing the school and being present in the meeting. Some of these lines of flight appear to be precarious, at risk of being discontinued or interrupted, such as the delay in the meeting being held, yet ultimately, Euryale's experience is reported to be a positive one. I wonder whether, in my reflections at the time, my focus on the less elegant aspects of these processes is reproducing an existing critique of research into the experiences of trans young people that there is too much focus on the negatives (Formby, 2015), something which can position these young people as perpetual victims in their narratives (Horton, 2022; Evans and Rawlings, 2021). Still, I mention to Euryale her comment about hoping there would be a more elegant solution or way of dealing with her coming out and ask her, "if you could have designed the most elegant way to communicate things, how would you have done it if we're thinking from an ideal perspective?"

> *Euryale: To be honest this that was kind of the ideal. I just like. I don't know how I would have done that if I had tried, so it was basically just that like the best solution without me going through every single person in the year individually and then saying if they knew me or not. So, it was like best* solution *pretty much.*
>
> *Tegan: What did it feel like once everybody knew?*
>
> *Euryale: Like better a lot better because I got to like actually, like, actually be myself at school. It wasn't much big fanfare outside of the big announcement, like people haven't really. It's not that people don't care. It's just like like it's it's like fairly normal. So, it's like it was. It was basically exactly what I hoped for, like, people, people knew and people are like respectful of identity, but, like, I haven't faced any like vocal back, like, big vocal backlash. But it's not like. People who would have ignored me before still ignore me, which is like good, because I'm not. I like, I don't like really being the centre of attention, especially in like large groups most of the time.*

“Pretty much all positive”: the continuing reconfiguration of the school assemblage

From the temporal aspect of the three-dimensional research space, Euryale’s experiences of her school identity deterritorialising and reconfiguring seem to exist across past, present and future at once. We have spoken about intra-actions of assemblage elements which have brought her to a place of coming out and now, given the recency of this shift, each conversation involves a balance between sharing updates on progress made while envisioning how things may continue to progress. Many of my research journal entries feature some variation of, “I am interested/excited/apprehensive to hear about how this has gone next time we meet”. At various points I ask Euryale about her ideal imagined future, or if she could “wave a magic wand, how would you improve things at school in terms of inclusion” but on each occasion Euryale admits to finding this question a difficult one to answer. On the one hand I feel somewhat saddened that Euryale struggles to envision these ideal or imagined futures for herself. If previous generations of LGBTQ+ groups hadn’t been able to engage in aspirational world building, would we have achieved some of the progress that has been made in terms of inclusion and equality? Yet in writing this section it is only now that I am reflecting that perhaps it is enough now for Euryale to simply feel settled in the tangible experiences of her present. As she tells me, “I don’t have this big secret that I’m trans anymore.” While experiencing such a major shift in her identity assemblage, I wonder if the most important thing for Euryale at the moment is to be allowed the time and space to adjust to these reconfigurations.

Each time we meet, I ask Euryale how her time at school has been since we last spoke. What has helped or hindered her? What elements of the school assemblage have intra-acted to inform her ongoing, evolving experiences? Euryale tells me that she is still in the boy’s group for PE, and I feel myself tense, imagining potential instances of misgendering resulting from insufficient institutional policies. However, Euryale counters this response as she appears to indicate this is her preference. She tells me:

Euryale: I'm still in the boys changing room, but I have a little annex. That is like my annex that people aren't like, allowed to go into. I'm. I'm still on the boys PE group, which honestly, I don't mind because most of my friends are boys, so I'm still with my friends. Like it's a little like. A little annoying, but like all in all, I'd probably rather be in the boys group. Like outside of, just like a gender affirmation, like I have friends in that group. Same with the. I'm on a, going on a school trip in a week and I'm still. I'm in. I'm in still in a room with boys, but again, they're my close friends and if I was in a room with girls, it would be like mutual acquaintances at best, who probably already have people they'd rather have in their rooms so. Me being in the boy's room was what I actually specifically requested. It was easier for the school to like, sort out, so it's fine.

Euryale's assertion that she is fine with remaining in the boy's group raises interesting reflections on school spaces which are still divided along binary gender lines. While the inclination may be to assume Euryale should now be in the girl's PE group, is this merely reproducing existing essentialised, binary understandings of gender identity and presentation? Perhaps the line of flight in this instance is as much to do with the PE assemblage itself, as discussed by Ferguson (2024). If Euryale can elect to remain in the boy's group, what possibilities could this create for other pupils, both trans and cisgender? For Euryale, is seems that her friendships have been incredibly important components of her narrative to this point, and I ask if she can talk a little more about this. Euryale tells me:

Euryale: I've got like a few close friends who really helped. My best friend. His name is XXXX. I've known him for a while. He's gay. He's the first person I came out to. And yeah. Been friends for a while. He's definitely helped a lot. My second, my, like, the second person I came out to their name is XXXX. They're, like, they're very vocal about, like their support of, like, trans people. And they're also like, possibly trans themselves. That's why I'm using they/them for them. They're really the main ones. I've had other friends that I've come out to but like. They've helped me by just being my friends, but they've not really helped me really outside of that. Like they've not given any very specific. Like specific trans

support because they are mostly just cis-het aside from like a few, like gay men I'm friends with.

Euryale continues in her telling of her experiences at school since coming out. I ask her how things have been outside of the immediate surroundings of her close friends, along with how she has felt herself. Euryale takes a few moments to consider this, she appears calm, and it seems like she is replaying her recent experiences in her mind before narrating them into the interview space. Then she says:

Euryale: Yeah, I felt a lot more confident. Confident, like, talking to classmates. I'm better at talking to people now.

Tegan: That's great. Where do you think that confidence has come from?

Euryale: I think just, like, I've already. My biggest fear in terms of interaction was people, like, hating me. But they haven't. And, like, I've gotten over that and accepted that, like, some people are gonna hate me and they aren't worth me caring about their opinion. And, like, I don't have the big secret that I'm trans anymore, so I can just talk about whatever I want. Like, if someone doesn't like me, now I don't really care because I think there's no real. I don't. I'm not a perfect person but I don't think I'm worth hating. So if someone does hate me, it's probably for a stupid reason.

Tegan: Do you think that change has happened since you came out?

Euryale: I think it's been gradually building, but, like, I think coming out has helped a lot more.

Tegan: In what ways do you think it's helped?

Euryale: It's basically. I don't know. I just think, like, people. I now know that there are people out there who just hate me because of what I am. And I have to, and I just can't do anything about that.

This reflection from Euryale is a difficult one to hear, although I am struck by her level of resilience. She does not appear sad as she talks in this moment, the affective resonance is one of resignation but still, this resignation seems to have resulted in her feeling less encumbered by a preoccupation with what others think. I ask how it feels to have an awareness that some people may dislike someone, or indeed, yourself because of an identity. Euryale shrugs and I elect instead to reframe my question and ask her whether some of this newfound confidence has meant she can express herself in any way differently?

Euryale: Yeah, I've been. I've been able to. Before I came out to my parents, I was, like, exclusively in, like, boy clothes all the time. And then I came out to my parents, I was kinda more of like, in androgynous clothing. But, like, I've been able to, like, wear skirts and dresses. So I've been able to go out in skirts and dresses and like into town without being like, 'oh someone's going to see me'. I've started wearing jewellery. Not much though. And yes, this week I have actually started wearing skirts in school.

Tegan: Could you say a little more about how that's felt?

Euryale: Yeah, it's been a lot better. I feel a lot more. Like, I look like me, like in school. Like, I give more of the correct impression of who I am through my clothing.

Where does the story go from here?

As we move towards the end of our time together, it strikes me each time I meet with Euryale how confident she appears to be becoming. I wonder how much of this is

due to her feeling increasingly comfortable in the research space? How much is it do with the increased sense of self and belonging that she has narrated? To what extent has the discourse of our interviews intra-acted with elements of other assemblages in her life to further embed the reconfiguration of her identity?

In our last interview, Euryale discusses other interests she has. She enjoys making art and is considering ways to use this as an expression of different aspects of her identity, her emotions, her experiences. She talks about going to sixth form or college and then to university. I ask her how she feels about the prospect of entering new spaces and meeting new people. Euryale replies:

Euryale: It's a bit like starting with a blank slate.

Tegan: Could you tell me in what way it feels like this?

Euryale: Just, like, I can show them how I want to be seen. I can still be myself, but, like, again."

As mentioned, as she talks about her future Euryale finds it more difficult to discuss imagined scenarios which she may hope for. However, rather than sadness the feeling I am left with as we bring our time together to a close is one of possibility and hopefulness. I write an entry in my research journal which focusses on discussion of the term trans and its semantic usage as a form of prefix. Trans as in 'across', 'beyond', 'through', 'on the other side of'. The sense these terms bring to mind feels deeply appropriate for the narrative focus of this study. Euryale's story is one told across time. She has moved through and beyond understandings of her own identity to arrive on the other side of a period in her life which has been challenging and emotional, yet affirming and positive in her sense of self. I reflect on how the assemblage of the research may have contributed to these processes and note down, following a conversation with a friend, a sentence about "creating the conditions for these conversations to happen and this progress to be made." Despite there being no 'final story' for Euryale, I decide to check back in with her a few weeks after our final interview. Her response is brief, but feels like an appropriate end to this snapshot of her story, and speaks to the importance of this type of research:

“Hi Tegan. Apologies for my late response. I have been well since, thank you for asking. I quite enjoyed the interviews. Thank you for letting me tell my story.”

Discussion

Identifying Narrative Threads

The process of crafting research texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) in narrative inquiry was not a simple matter of transcription. Instead, it was an active and interpretive process which was shaped by the relational encounters between me as researcher, Euryale as the participant, and the world in which the stories unfold and were narrated into existence. In this study, I came to understand that the process of turning the data into research texts was not linear, but was, as previously mentioned, a messy and reflexive process. It was one which involved searching for narrative threads while paying attention to the various fragments, tensions, and affective intensities that resisted neat resolution. This was a process of identifying which threads would weave together with others, and which would be left hanging. The following section attempts reflect on this process, exploring both the creative and theoretical aspects of narrative re-storying and the ways in which assemblage theory has offered a complementary lens to conceptualise complexity, emergence, and relationality in this study.

As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) discuss, narrative inquiry is an approach that seeks to explore the storied nature of human experience. It requires researchers to construct texts that are not only faithful to the narratives shared, but that also honour the dynamic interplay of time, place, and relationships. In attempting to trace coherent narrative threads through the stories being told, I found myself grappling with the challenge of coherence versus multiplicity: how to do justice to Euryale’s voice while acknowledging the broader sociocultural and material forces that shaped her experiences.

As discussed in the methodology section, this tension led to the incorporation of assemblage theory (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; DeLanda, 2006) as a way of rethinking

the process of narrative construction. It helped me to see the process of searching for meaning in the stories not as an attempt to uncover a single underlying truth, but as an emergent, situated practice. Assemblage theory foregrounds the provisional, contingent, and heterogeneous nature of phenomena, highlighting how entities (including stories, ideas of self, and research texts) are formed through temporary alignments of diverse elements. By viewing the research texts themselves as an assemblage (made up of narrative fragments, theoretical concepts, Euryale's voice, affective resonances which occurred, my own reflections, and institutional discourses) I was able to reframe the act of storytelling as one of composition.

This theoretical framing enabled a more nuanced engagement with the data, one that resisted closure and allowed for the co-existence of contradictory or partial narratives, and in doing so complemented the other guiding theoretical frameworks of feminist post-structuralism and queer theory. It also offered a way to remain attentive to the affective and material dimensions of the research, the aspects that may escape traditional narrative representation but that are nonetheless crucial in shaping meaning.

In the following section, I seek to discuss the narrative threads which resonated as I spent time considering the research puzzle of this study (dela Cruz, 2014). I also consider how assemblage theory provided a further layer of richness to the process of narrative inquiry by providing a vocabulary and framework for thinking with complexity. In the subsequent section, I will also explore how this has implications not only for how we analyse stories, but for how we engage ethically and creatively with the act of research itself.

Narrative Thread One: Community as Assemblage

A central narrative thread that emerged from this inquiry was the complex and shifting role of community in shaping Euryale's experiences of gender identity and self-understanding. Through the lens of narrative inquiry, Euryale's stories revealed community not as a fixed or homogenous entity, but as a constellation of relational spaces, both online and offline, that offered varying degrees of recognition, support,

resistance, and transformation over time. From an assemblage theory perspective, we can understand these communities not as wholes with fixed boundaries but as fluid, contingent gatherings of people, discourses, technologies, and affective intensities that coalesce and dissolve in ways that profoundly shaped Euryale's becoming.

From early adolescence, online communities emerged as a crucial site of exploration and affirmation. Platforms such as Reddit and YouTube were described not merely as social media spaces but as dynamic assemblages that enabled Euryale to access trans-inclusive language, visibility, and collective narratives otherwise absent in her immediate offline environment. These digital assemblages were composed of more than just users. They included algorithms that highlighted particular content, hashtags that linked individuals into loose networks, and even memes that circulated affective and political messages, along with moments of levity. For Euryale, these online spaces became a central and grounding element of her emerging identity, suggesting that they functioned as affective assemblages where survival and self-recognition were made possible, and where the components of other more constrictive assemblages began to be deterritorialised.

Euryale's experiences are indicative of other studies which have focussed on the use of online spaces by LGBTQ+ young people, specifically the role that social media plays in contributing to their positive identity development. Lucero (2017) found that social media platforms frequently function as a safe space for a multiplicity of LGBTQ+ identities to explore their sexuality and gender, along with seeking and forming connections with others. Similarly, Alix (2021) has discussed the ways in which LGBTQ+ young people use online platforms to share information, assist others in their respective identity developments, and form positive meaningful relationships which are often transferred into offline contexts. In doing so, LGBTQ+ young people begin to ameliorate the impact of coming of age within a society which remains heteronormative and cisnormative in its structure (Alix, 2021). Euryale's occupation of online LGBTQ+ spaces and their impact on her identity development addresses a question raised in the literature review of this study around how significant a role social media plays in shaping LGBTQ+ identity development. Additionally, the apparent delineation between

Euryale's identity development within online spaces and her identity development within the school context suggests that while the two spaces do not necessarily exist in confliction of each other, there is potentially more that the school setting could have done to create opportunities for the dismantling of normative structures in a similar way to that which has occurred in online spaces.

Offline, community was sometimes more uneven for Euryale. Her school, for example, functioned as a site of both constraint and solidarity. While institutional policies and peer cultures sometimes reinforced cisnormative expectations, individual teachers and classmates could be seen to act as micro-assemblages of care, offering moments of recognition and safety. This supports findings from McGowan et al. (2023) who suggest that an overarching theme of acceptance and validation from staff and other pupils is a key factor in the positive experiences of transgender young people in secondary education. These moments were experienced by Euryale as deeply meaningful and often narrated as important instances of affirmation and visibility which acted as a form of counter story to other instances of erasure, both actual and perceived. Additionally, LGBTQ+ groups were described as more intentional and affirming assemblages, though these too were subject to flux, fragmentation, and internal tensions around identity and sense of belonging. These contradictive narratives align with existing research into the part of LGBTQ+ groups in shaping and developing an individual's identity within the LGBTQ+ community. For many, they can act as sites of affirmation and support (Harris et al., 2021; Leonard, 2022), yet for others they can represent a space of potential risk due to attendance leading to being outed (Harris et al., 2021), an aspect which Euryale herself reflected upon.

Importantly, Euryale's narrative resisted any apparent idealisation of community. Instead, community was often viewed and interpreted as something which was more actively navigated, negotiated, and sometimes survived. Different community assemblages functioned in overlapping and sometimes contradictory ways, offering support while also imposing norms, enabling visibility while also rendering some identities more legible than others (Just Like Us, 2020). This was particularly apparent during discussion of online community spaces where discourses occur

relating to the authenticity of different trans identities, and in the tentative way Euryale accessed her school's LGBT club during the period when she was navigating the fluidity of her emergent identity from bisexual to a trans young woman. This resonates with Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) notion of assemblages as always provisional, always in the process of becoming. Euryale's gender identity itself was narrated not as a fixed endpoint but as something that was continually shaped, enabled, and at times constrained by her relational entanglement with these various community forms. As she progresses from secondary school into higher education and young adulthood, the latter acting as a *transitional assemblage* in the same vein as adolescence, Euryale will become entangled in still further forms of community. The manner in which their components intra-act will continue, hopefully, to create further lines of flight for Euryale to progress on the paths she hopes to follow.

Ultimately, this narrative thread around community challenges simplistic binaries about the way that we differentiate between online and offline, safe and unsafe, or supportive and oppressive communities. It points instead to the necessity of thinking with assemblage theory to understand the complex socio-material and affective infrastructures that shape transgender lives, whether they are in educational or social contexts. Communities, in this sense, are not merely backdrops to identity but are active co-producers of it. Whether online or offline, accessed infrequently or as a continual part of daily life, they are spaces where possibilities for recognition, agency, and becoming are assembled, contested, and sometimes dismantled.

Narrative Thread Two: Evolving Identities

Euryale's journey of identity formation emerged as a nonlinear, multi-layered process which was shaped by her and others' shifting understandings of self, social interactions, and institutional contexts. Initially identifying as bisexual in early adolescence, Euryale later came out as transgender and, more recently, identifies as a lesbian. This progression reflects not only personal introspection but also the complex interplay of affective, material, and discursive forces, something which Deleuze and Guattari (1987) would refer to as being its own form of assemblage. For Euryale, the

complex and dynamic intra-actions of these assemblage components can be seen to render certain identity possibilities more or less available at different given moments.

From a narrative inquiry perspective, Euryale's evolving identity was not presented as a fixed trajectory but as a series of situated *becomings*. Her story articulated identity not as a stable endpoint but as a process of continuous negotiation and emergence. Merging the narrative inquiry lens with assemblage theory helps conceptualise this movement further. Identity for Euryale was and is not simply a self-contained essence but rather it is a constellation of relations between bodies, spaces, technologies, discourses, and temporalities. For example, the shift from bisexual to trans young woman and then to lesbian did not follow a clear path with a known endpoint which was being consciously worked towards. Instead, it reflected an expanding vocabulary of self-understanding and desire, partially enabled by access to online LGBTQ+ communities, supportive peers, and changing institutional responses within her school (adoption of different school uniform, usage of her new name, etc.)

A critical dimension of this narrative is the repeated necessity of 'coming out', with each articulation of an identity requiring new disclosures, new negotiations, and new vulnerabilities. As Sedgwick (1990) and other queer theorists have argued, the act of coming out is never a singular event but a recursive process, compelled by heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions that render LGBTQ+ identities as deviant from an assumed norm. Euryale described having to come out across multiple temporalities and social contexts, each time encountering a reconfiguration of her social world. This illustrates how identity is not merely internal but relational and performative, co-constituted through assemblages of school policies, peer cultures, family dynamics, and digital networks.

Crucially, Euryale's account also highlighted how certain environments afforded or constrained particular identity expressions. Within school, gender identity was sometimes seen to be regulated to varying extents through more binary understandings embedded in uniforms, the changing room, and classroom language. These spaces, while sometimes sites of affirmation, were also structured in ways that made trans and queer identities feel or appear at times precarious. Warner (1999) has discussed how

within education settings the enforcement of cirsnormative and heteronormative structures act to maintain power dynamics which restrict opportunities for self-expression and identity development amongst LGBTQ+ pupils, leading to a form of educational injustice (Horton, 2021). Conversely, online platforms and select peer relationships acted as catalytic assemblages, facilitating lines of flight which created opportunities for experimentation, reflection, and eventual rearticulation of identity (Lucero, 2017; Alix, 2021).

The transition to identifying as a lesbian following her coming out as trans exemplifies the ongoing nature of queer becoming. It also actively challenges the notion of a singular 'coming out' as a linear move toward authenticity. Instead, what emerges is a shifting assemblage of desires, affiliations, and embodiments, each reconstituted in response to the permissions and denials of the environments that Euryale moves through. This aligns with Clegg's (2006) suggestion that identity is always in the making, continually enacted through narratives that are themselves situated within broader socio-material relations. It also supports the ecosystemic view of Bronfenbrenner (1997) that the identity and development of young people does not exist within a vacuum state but is instead influenced by a complex and multidirectional interplay between different systemic factors.

Viewing the narrative thread of Euryale's evolving identity underscores the multiplicity and fluidity of queer youth experience. Narrative inquiry revealed the significance of storytelling as a method for capturing the temporal and affective dimensions of this process, while assemblage theory enabled a nuanced understanding of how diverse forces, both human and non-human, create the conditions under which identities emerge, stabilise, or transform. The story of becoming bisexual, then trans, and later lesbian is not a sequence of discrete identities, but an unfolding assemblage of subjectivities shaped by the interweaving of personal insight, cultural discourse, and institutional structures.

Narrative Thread Three: Visibility as a Shifting Assemblage

In tracing the narrative thread of visibility, what emerges is not a fixed arc from hidden to seen, but a contingent and negotiated process embedded within the everyday assemblages of school life, home, public space, and interpersonal relationships. As mentioned in the previous section, through the lens of narrative inquiry, Euryale's story does not unfold as a simple tale of coming out, but as a complex choreography of passing, masking, and revealing that shifts with context, emotion, and perception. These movements are not simply personal choices but are the effects of dynamic configurations of materials and discourses. For Euryale these include the school uniform policy, perceived glances in corridors from other pupils, the conflicted sense of wishing to dress androgynously while still being viewed as a woman, the noise outside the library where the LGBT club is held, and the partial privacy of the changing room annex.

For Euryale it was external visibility which first allowed her to attain a sense of resonance with others like her. Through access to positive online trans spaces, she reported small, quiet, yet still formative affirmations which complemented other moments such as recognition of LGBTQ+ teachers and ephemera including posters and pride badges which promoted inclusion within her school. For Euryale, these moments of external visibility acted to provide an increased sense of psychological safety and belonging, even at a point when she was not ready to publicly claim her trans identity.

Personal visibility for Euryale was often a more precarious, tentative and emotionally charged process, particularly around her trans and lesbian identities. Unlike the external visibility, there was a sense that Euryale's personal visibility as a trans young person was not passive, it required, in her words, "performance" and was often informed by the intra-actions of different components of the school assemblage (policies, uniforms, responses of peers and staff, etc.) along with the macrosystemic impact of wider policies and ideologies. However, despite her anxieties and the potential discontinuity in the lines of flight which were seen as the assemblage of her identity reterritorialised, Euryale did experience positive outcomes of personal visibility such as affirmation from chosen peers, greater confidence, and institutional support

from teachers and her Head of Year. In narrating these positive stories of affirmation, this research contributes to rebalancing the focus of existing research from one which centres gender diverse young people as victims or vulnerable within their narratives (Horton, 2022; Asakura et al., 2020) to one which recognises instances of positivity (Evans and Rawlings, 2021). At a time when there exists worry and uncertainty for trans people of all ages due to macrosystemic factors such as educational and governmental policy, articulating instances of positive affirmation for a trans young person acts as a beacon hope.

For Euryale, visibility was not a singular phenomenon but a layered, contingent and fluid experience which varied depending on time, place, relational entanglements and the dynamic intra-actions between different assemblage components. At points, Euryale's personal visibility seemed to be accompanied by a felt sense that she *should* be engaging in activism on behalf of others like her. This aligns with research by Davy and Cordoba (2020) that it is often young people and their parents who end up being the ones who hold the burden of educating others on their needs, leading to reactive rather than proactive instances of support from education settings (Davy and Cordoba, 2020; Horton and Carlile, 2022). This contrasted with instances, such as when she was with her close friends, when Euryale's transness felt less prominent and defining of her as a person. In these instances, Euryale's experience mirror those of young people in other studies (Evans and Rawlings, 2021; Ferguson, 2024) where friendships were reported to be an important aspect within the school setting for reducing the burden which gender diverse young people experience around seeking instances of positive moments of belonging. In this sense, the narrative thread of visibility reveals a difference in agency between *seeing* and *being seen*. External visibility provided Euryale with a sense of choice in being able to seek out positive representations when and how she wanted. On the other hand, personal visibility was sometimes less controllable and often inextricably linked to external validation and recognition.

The intra-action of different clothing with other elements of her identity assemblages, both in and out of school, was also something which contributed to a fluid sense of visibility for Euryale. Adoption of items consistent with a binary

interpretation of a girl's school uniform (skirts, tights, etc.) led to feelings of affirmation but also a feeling of being better able to blend in at school. The school uniform can be seen to create a line of flight which deterritorialises Euryale's existing identity assemblage but simultaneously reterritorialises it into a reconfiguration of a standardised example of gender expression that at times restricted any further articulation of self. In this moment, clothing functioned within a material assemblage that stabilised visibility in one direction: a sense that it was enough to go unnoticed, but sometimes not enough to be seen. Outside of school, Euryale described a similar relationship to clothes. After coming out as trans at school, she felt more able to wear items which had the parallel of effect of helping her blend into her reconfigured identity, but which would potentially make her *more visible* to people who might recognise her. Euryale also spoke of the pressure she sometimes felt to now present in more stereotypical feminine clothing, as adopting, in her words, "a classic lesbian outfit would make me be perceived as a man". However, this pressure was reported to reduce in the presence of her existing friends as "they already know I'm a woman so I can wear what I want". This subtle and ongoing negotiation of appearance was part of a wider strategy to negotiate public visibility: to be out, but not always on display. Assemblage theory enables the recognition of the relational construction of this visibility. It is not as an inner truth waiting to be expressed, but rather something which is enacted through the affordances and constraints of clothing, gaze, perception, time, and place.

The narrative thread of shifting visibility also challenges dominant discourses of being 'out' as inherently liberatory. Euryale discussed that being open about her gender identity did not necessarily equate to a desire to be defined by it, especially in the future as she progresses to university and young adulthood. In her words, she wishes to "start with a blank state". Here, visibility is both freeing and a burden; it can invite recognition but also misrecognition, tokenisation, and reductionist understandings of identity. The desire was not to disappear, but to integrate. To feel seen without necessarily being spotlighted. This narrative is one which highlights a common paradox for trans people as they move from one 'closet' to another (Russell et al, 2024). After the increased visibility which accompanies coming out, attaining some sense of invisibility becomes

the next goal. Given the increasing hostility of government policy towards trans communities in the UK at the time of writing, invisibility and passing act not merely as acts of affirmation but as necessary methods of survival.

The narrative thread of shifting visibility resists linear models of trans becoming and instead speaks to a more situated and assemblage-informed understanding of identity. Navigation of visibility is not a movement toward a singular, authentic self, but a constant reconfiguration of selfhood in relation to the multiple assemblages one inhabits. Passing, then, is not a final destination but a tactical negotiation; clothing is not merely expression but a mediator of safety and legibility; and being out is not the same as being visible.

Implications for Research and Practice

This study highlights the importance of using participatory, flexible, and responsive research methods that align with the fluid realities of young people's lives. It also contributes to the growing recognition that research with marginalised young people must move beyond simplistic representations of identity which are informed by cis-and-heteronormative systems and instead seek to develop more nuanced, relational, and dynamic understandings.

In line with one of its guiding theoretical frameworks, Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994), the implications of this study should also be viewed within the wider systemic and cultural landscape in which it took place, along with maintaining consideration of how it relates to the three-dimensional research space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Temporally, this study arrives at a point when it could be argued that education settings are at risk of moving backwards in terms of the support provided for trans young people. That the main piece of research informing government guidance on supporting gender diverse young people in schools, The Cass Review, has been criticised for not taking into consideration the voices of trans young people themselves (Maung, 2024), this review seeks to contribute to redressing this balance in highlighting the importance in using research methods underpinned by relational ethics to better

understand the gendered subjectivities of young people in education settings and beyond.

In its adoption of narrative inquiry to explore the lived experiences of a trans young person, both in and out of her school setting, this research makes a positive contribution to both educational practice and future research approaches, particularly when focussing on marginalised demographics of young people. By focussing on Euryale's personal narratives this study also succeeds in illuminating the complexity of identity development for trans young people, including how space, relationships and different structures of power shape experiences within an education setting and beyond. Narrative inquiry proved valuable in creating space for Euryale to articulate her own stories, resist imposed identities, and reflect on moments of tension, growth, and resilience. Rather than treating Euryale as a passive subject in the study, narrative inquiry foregrounded her agency in co-constructing meaning, allowing for the development of rich and nuanced insights. This approach could be used by those working with young people, including Educational Psychologists, school staff, and other researchers, to utilise storytelling as a way to build trust, affirm young people's identities, and illuminate the frequently hidden dynamics of school experiences which shape self-expression and a developing sense of belonging. By affirming and validating the lived experiences of trans young people, narrative practices can help professionals to foster more inclusive environments where these young people feel seen and heard on their own terms.

Narrative and storying approaches offer powerful tools for Educational Psychologists working directly with trans young people. As this study has shown, these approaches enable young people to author preferred stories of identity that resist deficit-based or externally imposed narratives. Through conversations which externalise problems, for example making reference to "the worry about being misgendered" rather than "your anxiety", Educational Psychologists can support young people to articulate strengths, values, and hopes that affirm their identities.

In practical terms, this may take the form of an Educational Psychologist working collaboratively with a young person to create a ‘preferred identity story’. This could be done through techniques such as Participatory Narrative Inquiry (Colla and Kurtz, 2024) or the 6-Part Story Method (Dent-Brown, 2024), both of which are creative, dynamic approaches which help to explore a young person’s storied experiences in an empathetic way. These stories can be revisited and shared with others to reinforce positive identity development and self-advocacy. Importantly, narrative practices position the young person as expert in their own life, fostering empowerment and agency.

When combined with assemblage theory, narrative inquiry became even more powerful as a tool for understanding the fluid and relational nature of trans identity in school contexts. Using assemblage theory as a theoretical guide to complement narrative inquiry offers potential new pathways for ethically and proactively engaging with young people whose identities and lives are often misrepresented, oversimplified, or rendered invisible in dominant discourses. For future research and practice, assemblage theory offers a conceptual vocabulary and analytic framework that can better account for the entangled and uneven power dynamics which shape the lives of marginalised young people. Its use in this study can act as a challenge to Educational Psychologists, school staff, and other practitioners to think beyond individual interventions and instead consider how broader assemblages such as school policies, school cultures, the built environment, digital platforms, and institutional norms contribute to either the marginalisation or affirmation of trans pupils.

The narrative threads identified in this study also lead to further potential implications and reflections for those supporting trans young people both in education contexts and beyond. Communities, both on-and-offline functioned as sites of affirmation, representation and respite, yet also required careful and considered navigation. This raises the following questions for those supporting trans young people:

- How can you effectively facilitate greater opportunities for trans young people to experience community connections, ones which provide

instances of care and affirmation, without being prescriptive and potentially othering (for example, LGBTQ+ groups and clubs)?

- To what extent are you aware of, and what is your engagement with, communities of trans young people? How could you engage with trans young people to develop your own understanding of these communities?
- What is your awareness of trans communities outside of your immediate professional context, for example, online? How might you be able to support trans young people to access positive examples of external communities?

Conceptualisations of visibility in this study were both empowering and potentially dangerous. For those supporting trans young people, the following reflective prompts could be useful when considering the visibility of trans young people both within and externally of their education setting:

- When considering how trans young people become visible within the different assemblages of their lives, have you considered in what ways this visibility may be accompanied by potential threat?
- Are the systems around a trans young person reactive to their coming out and increased visibility, or are they proactive?
- How does the built environment of a trans young person's education setting act in protective or dangerous ways around them being visible?
- To what extent are trans young people involved in discussions around their visibility?
- Are there opportunities for education and and positive representations of trans identities for others which can support instances of visibility?

Finally, identity in this study was narrated not as organised or linear, but as dialogically constructed alongside the intra-actions of a constellation of assemblage elements. For researchers and professionals whose interactions with a young person may be time bound in nature, including Educational Psychologists, it is important that the temporal aspects of identity development are carefully considered. A trans or queer

young person's experience of identity should not be reduced to a static representation at the time a professional or researcher may encounter them. All young people, but especially those who challenge hetero-and-cisnormative understandings of identity, possess storied experiences which should encourage professionals and researchers alike to move beyond approaches which seek purely to investigate *what is* and instead involve young people in collaborative and reflective discussions of *what has been* and *what is to come* (St Pierre, 2020). This raises some further questions to be considered by professionals and researchers alike:

- What is your current understanding of identity development for trans young people? To what extent are you engaging with trans young people directly to develop your understanding?
- How can you support young people with whom you work to explore potential areas of identity development?
- How are trans identities represented in your work? What are the discourses around trans identities? How may these discourses be promoting or hindering positive identity development opportunities for trans young people?
- Where do your existing beliefs and assumptions around identity development come from? In what ways do trans young people challenge these assumptions? In what ways can these challenges contribute to learning opportunities?

Given the varying levels of awareness and understanding which may exist among those supporting trans young people, Educational Psychologists can also have a role in supporting and facilitating some of the reflective points raised above, including through the further use of narrative storying techniques, to help other professionals to explore their assumptions and develop empathy through perspective-taking. For example, Educational Psychologists might facilitate sessions where staff collectively examine 'dominant stories' in school discourse about gender and inclusivity, and co-construct alternative, more affirming narratives, something which could be facilitated through approaches such as a PATH (Inclusive Solutions, n.d.) or a Forcefield Analysis (Lewin, 1951). As part of this, school staff could be supported to collaboratively identify

moments when the school has acted inclusively and ‘gotten it right’. Additionally, members of a school’s senior leadership team could be asked to reflect on the school’s organisational identity and culture around trans pupils, and to craft a vision statement grounded in inclusivity.

Finally, it is important that Educational Psychologists themselves also engage in continual reflection and training related to gender diversity and power dynamics in educational systems. Supervision and peer discussion can incorporate narrative reflection, examining the stories which Educational Psychologists tell about their own practice and how these shape their work with trans young people. This reflective stance supports ethical practice and reduces the risk of inadvertently reinforcing marginalising narratives.

Potential Limitations

The use of narrative inquiry means that the stories explored in this study are shaped by a unique combination of factors such as school policies, peer relationships, support systems, family dynamics, and societal attitudes towards gender diversity. As a result, the findings cannot be readily generalised to other trans young people or education settings. What one young person experienced at a relatively large semi-rural secondary school may differ considerably from the experience of a trans student in a smaller school in an urban setting. Some may argue that the singular nature of the account in the study limits the ability to draw broader conclusions about trans students’ experiences as a population, which could be perceived as a drawback when aiming to inform policy or practice on a larger scale. However, as Ferguson (2024) and St Pierre (2021) note, post-qualitative methodologies are not concerned with the discovery or representation of things which exist within the empirical world of human experience and so issues of generalisability are not being actively sought. Instead, the study explored the rich and storied experiences of one trans young person in a way which could be empowering and emancipatory in nature, facets which have been

discussed by Horton and Carlile (2022) as being integral to the positive educational experiences of trans and gender diverse young people.

An additional limitation of the study may be seen in the fact that narrative inquiry is inherently interpretive**,** with meaning constructed through both the participant's and the researcher's lenses. While this subjectivity is a strength in terms of capturing the richness and nuance of lived experience, it also leads to some potential drawbacks and raises important questions for consideration in future research. In focussing on one young person's subjective accounts, what stories remained unsaid? How did the importance that Euryale ascribed to certain experiences, and the way I interpreted them as a researcher (for example, viewing certain moments as lines of flight or instances of becoming) close off other avenues of enquiry? Which voices were absent which could contribute further to our understanding of identity development in gender diverse young people? For example, how may Euryale's experiences differ or share similarities to a non-binary young person whose identity arguably does more to challenge and disrupt cisnormative understandings of gender than Euryale's? How may intersectionality contribute to the experience of some trans young people, for example those from global majority backgrounds or those with disabilities?

Finally, storied accounts may be influenced by factors such as memory bias, emotion, or current circumstances**,** while the researcher's positionality, assumptions, and theoretical frameworks can shape how the narrative is analysed and presented. This double layer of subjectivity may lead to findings that are perceived as overly personal or anecdotal**,** making it difficult for stakeholders such as education staff and policymakers to create actionable next steps or distinguish which elements of the narrative are unique to the individual and which might reflect broader trends or systemic issues.

Conclusion

This study has sought to contribute to research which can aid professional understanding of the complex, fluid and at times contradictory nature of trans identity

development in the school setting and beyond. Motivated by a desire to create space for a trans young person to narrate their experiences at a time when this demographic is increasingly talked *about,* without being given the chance to be active participants in the future temporalities of their own lives, this study is also informed by ideas of disruption; disrupting constricting systemic structures, disrupting normative understandings of sexuality and gender development, and disrupting the ways that existing research paradigms explore such phenomena.

Unlike other quantitative and even some traditional qualitative research methods, the narrative inquiry methodology utilised is a deeply relational one where stories of experience are co-composed and understood (Dela Cruz, 2014). As the study progressed, the stories which were told, the way they were being told, and the avenues they opened led to consideration of the means being using to conceptualise and understand the stories. In simply looking at the written transcripts of interviews, what integral aspects of the stories would be missed? The body language and intonation as stories were told, the atmosphere in the room, the feelings which were evoked in me as the researcher as I listened and thought about my own stories. How many other elements had contributed to the stories which were being told and how could I effectively capture and articulate them?

Incorporation of assemblage theory felt increasingly necessary to capture the many threads which presented themselves in the stories, some threads intertwining with others, others frayed or left hanging loose. It was also a beneficial addition to a narrative inquiry methodological approach which complemented the systemic considerations of Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1997), the three-dimensional research space of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and the feminist post-structuralist and queer theory ideas of disruption regarding how we understand different elements of lived experiences.

This research is an assemblage of many constituent elements (the participant, myself as researcher, where the interviews took place, my engagement with other theoretical texts, discussions with my research supervisor, etc) and rather than the initial desire to research about something, it is the product of a realisation that researchers should instead situate their understanding in a place of being alongside

others, whether they are people, places or objects. This study rejects the idea that researchers can seek to understand the lived experiences of young people by adopting the role of passive observer. To do so does a disservice to the importance of relational ethics and collaborative meaning making and contributes to potentially harmful methodological and ontological positions which pathologise and dehumanise marginalised demographics and how they story their lives.

There are, within this research, many stories being told. There are stories which run alongside others, stories which overlap, stories which bump against others and act as counter-stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Stories of how community was navigated and the opportunities it created; stories of how visibility brings with it relief and apprehension; stories which disrupt linear, normative understandings of identity development. While the study has sought to explore the stories of one trans young person, one of the biggest realisations during this research process is that there can be no final story. This research is a story about stories, all of them acting on each other in some way within the context of the personal and the social; the past, present and future; and place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Stories and assemblages are always in flux and changing, and their changes will impact other stories and assemblages yet to be told or formed. Those working with young people, whether in a direct professional capacity or in the undertaking of research, should recognise how the temporal, relational, and situational aspects of their stories contribute to the way they make meaning of their experiences.

This study is an attempt to capture the stories as I stepped into the midst of them, to plug in to different assemblages, so that others may find greater meaning and understanding to inform future practice and research which can effectively support trans young people and others from marginalised identity demographics. The fact that the young person in this study shared her gratitude for the opportunity to tell her story signifies the importance of education staff, researchers, and others involved in decision making about young people's lives meaningfully including these young people in discussions about the issues which directly affect them.

Chapter 3: Reflective Chapter

It is not an overstatement to say that completing this piece of research has been one of the most challenging experiences of both my personal and professional life to date. It has had a deep and profound effect on my emotional and academic development. It has also been a process which I feel has had a significant impact on the way I understand and approach not just research and my work with young people as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP), but also how I engage with wider issues around inclusion and social justice for marginalised communities.

This chapter provides a critical, reflective account of the process of undertaking this piece of research. These reflections are informed by entries in my research journal, discussions with my research supervisor, and through the process of finding meaning through the writing (St Pierre, 2007) of both the previous two chapters and this current chapter. As a result of the way the three-dimensional research space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) has guided this research and the immersion in this framework which I have had to undertake, this reflective chapter will also use this lens to aid in reflecting upon how the research process has been situated within, and informed by, the aspects of temporality, sociality, and place.

Moving inwards and outwards across temporalities

Looking backwards, the initial idea for this research began to germinate during the first year of the doctorate training course. Completing an assignment which featured consideration of how legislation has impacted a particular demographic over time, I began exploring the ways that wider systemic policies had contributed to the experiences of LGBTQ+ young people within the UK education system. Growing up, my entire school experience had been under the Section 28 legislation, and I can recall almost no examples of positive queer representation either within my school setting or wider society and culture, let alone any representation for transgender people. Much of this time was spent figuring things out in relative isolation, but as I connected with new

supportive communities which contributed to my own becoming, my awareness of issues affecting the wider LGBTQ+ also developed. I had, naively on reflection, thought that while there remained room for improvement in supporting the needs of LGBTQ+ young people within education contexts, things must have improved significantly since my own adolescence. Engagement with literature around LGBTQ+ school experiences coincided with a period of undertaking a volunteer youth work position with a local LGBTQ+ charity and it was these parallel experiences that began to highlight the progress that was still to be made and potential areas of research which could be considered. Young people spoke of some of their frustrations with their school's policies, of their sense that efforts to promote inclusive practices were more around paying lip-service to LGBTQ+ inclusion, rather than taking tangible steps to bring about meaningful change. This aligned with studies such as that of Harris et al. (2021) which suggested an apparent disconnect between the way school staff viewed inclusion efforts and the lived experiences of students within the same schools.

Moving outwards to view the existential social conditions at this time also began to increasingly highlight that decisions about LGBTQ+ young people, especially those who are trans or gender diverse, do not regularly privilege the voices of these young people. As a Trainee Educational Psychologist this is antithetical to the way in which I and other TEPs and EPs seek to work. Positioning young people's voices at the centre of our work is not just a legislative component of the SEND Code of Practice (2015) it is also an ethical imperative. Moving inwards to reflect on my own feelings as I engaged further with the literature review of this study left me with feelings of frustration and sadness that a vulnerable demographic of young people seemed to be increasingly marginalised and used as a political dog whistle in social discourses around their own lives. The internal feelings were however also ones of commitment to try and undertake research which could redress this balance, to provide an opportunity for trans young people to advocate for themselves through the narration of their own stories. I was also hopeful that in this narration would bring into existence instances of joy and affirmation which could counteract wider cultural narratives and a significant amount of existing academic research which position trans young people as perpetual victims lacking agency (Horton, 2022; Asakura et al., 2020).

Engagement in the literature review for this study, and commencement of the interviews themselves, also brought up many instances of profound personal reflection. Spending a significant amount of time reading literature, both in the academic research context and broader news items, which discusses the negative experiences of trans identities, including many of the latter which actively delegitimise your own identity, is something which at times felt incredibly difficult to navigate. I was grateful during this period for access to regular reflexive supervision and made frequent use of my research journal as a means to articulate and reflect upon some of the feelings which conducting this research was evoking. The emotional nature of undertaking this study was exacerbated by an experience while on placement of receiving transphobic abuse from a pupil while in a school. This incident, along with the engagement with literature, led to times around this period where I questioned why I had chosen to undertake a piece of research which held such a significant amount of personal significance. However, two separate moments occurred which proved pivotal in instilling a sense of resolve to complete this study. The first was engagement with the text 'An Apartment on Uranus' (Preciado, 2020), specifically the chapter entitled 'Who Defends the Queer Child?' which states:

> *"The defenders of childhood and family conjure up the political image of a child that they construct, a child presumed to be heterosexual, with a standard binary gender. A child who is being stripped of any power to resist, any possibility of making free, collective use of their body…This childhood they claim to be protecting necessitates terror, oppression and death."*

While Preciado's text is intentionally provocative, its intent is also to engage in the act of imagined world building where the protagonist of the text can live free from the constraints of hetero-and-cisnormativity. Given that two of the guiding theoretical frameworks for this study, feminist post-structuralism and queer theory, are also concerned with the disruption and dismantling of normative understandings of sexuality and gender, the above extract made a significant impact on my reflections around completing the study. It made me ask the question of how I could use my own

privilege to advocate for not just the young person who participated in the study but how the study's findings could potentially assist in advocating for trans young people more broadly? With this study occurring at a time when it feels as if trans young people are being increasingly stripped of power to resist, I discovered renewed sense of purpose in creating the conditions for a trans young person's stories to be told, stories which could hopefully act to restore a greater sense that trans young people can and do possess agency and autonomy within their own lives.

The second pivotal moment arrived during the initial stages of the first interview. Euryale's articulate and reflective discussion of her initial coming out, and the disclosure that this occurred only two weeks prior to that first interview, was a profound moment when I began to understand the potential emancipatory power which allowing trans young people to narrate their own lived experiences can provide. I wrote in my research journal at this time, and on subsequent occasions, about a desire to do the stories being narrated justice. Returning to this guiding core value during the interview process and subsequent data analysis proved an incredibly beneficial tool in balancing the emotional impact of the stories themselves and awareness of the wider situational context in which the study was taking place.

Personal resonance with the narrative threads

As I engaged further in the puzzle of this study, I increasingly realised that while emotive in nature, separating myself from active engagement in the collaborative research process was neither beneficial nor ethical. As I have reflected on previously, as a transgender researcher conducting a narrative inquiry into the experiences of a transgender young person, my positionality is inherently entangled with the research process. However, rather than viewing myself as a detached observer, I acknowledged my role as an active participant in meaning-making. Rather than positioning my transgender identity as a bias to be controlled or bracketed, I understand it as a vital lens through which knowledge is produced. To this end, as the data analysis process progressed and I recognised my place within the broader research assemblage, I also

considered how the narrative threads I identified for Euryale were represented from my perspective.

My own visibility as a trans researcher and trainee Educational Psychologist has been a complex and multifaceted aspect of this research process. As discussed previously, my trans identity is not a static backdrop to this study but an active and evolving aspect of the research assemblage. It influences how I am perceived, how trust is or is not built, how stories are narrated, and which stories become accessible. Visibility, for me, is not just about *being seen* but also about how and by whom I am rendered visible. Sometimes this visibility is welcome and beneficial and at other times it becomes problematised. Visibility during this research, and in the parallel assemblage of my training placement, has existed as both resource and vulnerability. This tension is one which I have realised is not resolvable but is instead a central aspect of conducting trans focussed research and being a trans trainee EP within institutional contexts which remain dominated by cisnormative narratives. The material and relational components of my own visibility are entanglements in the narratives of those with whom I work, both as part of this research and in my wider role as a trainee EP. Visibility as a narrative thread, for both Euryale and myself, is not one which exists in isolation but is instead co-produced, and fits in with broader discussions and struggles about who gets to be seen, heard, and recognised within educational and academic settings.

As researcher, community also became an integral narrative thread for me within the research. I am part of a network of relations, formed through academic, activist, and professional communities, that shaped how I listened, how I interpreted, and how I understood the narratives which Euryale shared with me. These communities did not simply provide a backdrop to the research, they actively co-produced the conditions of possibility for this inquiry. They were spaces where language around gender and power was constantly evolving, where practices of care and critique intertwined, and where I learned to attend to the affective dimensions of trans life.

In particular, my experiences in workplace and academic settings played a formative role in how I approached this study. At times, these spaces were affirming and generative, such as during supervision meetings or certain sessions working with pupils in a school. In these moments they offered me language, support, and critical frameworks which provided clarity of thought and focus. At other times, they reproduced the very normative and subjugating constraints that I was seeking to unsettle. Navigating these tensions allowed me to reflect more deeply on the contradictions and negotiations that are part of trans life, and how these shaped both my understanding of Euryale's narratives and my own sense of self as a trans person engaged in research.

This process revealed to me how knowledge is not only constructed through stories, but also through the relations that make storytelling possible, relations that are emotional, political, material, and social. My identity as a trans researcher was not a static category I brought into the research, but something that emerged through it. It was shaped by listening, by discomfort, by recognition, and by the affective currents that flowed between me and Euryale. In many ways, I came to see myself not just as a researcher of trans experience, but as a *becoming* trans subject, someone who was continually shaped by the stories I encountered and the communities I moved within.

Dissemination of Findings

Consideration around the dissemination of this study's findings has been a point of discussion and reflection for what feels like a significant part of the research process. While I am keen for this study to make a meaningful contribution to professional and academic understanding of the lived experience of a trans young person so that it may inform positive instances of policy and practice, I have also been mindful of what it means to release research into trans identities at a time when societal discourses around them have become increasingly polarised and hostile. A central aspect of these considerations is concerned with the previously discussed narrative thread of visibility. To what extent am I prepared to open myself up to potential

negative feedback from others, both within and outside the profession in which I am entering as I progress from a TEP to a qualified EP? What systems will be in place to provide support should this negative feedback materialise? I have reflected during conversations with both my research supervisor and placement supervisor that my primary desire is to be able to carry out my role as an EP unencumbered by worries about how my gender identity may problematise this work. However, given the increasingly politicised nature of trans identities is this desire naïve, and does it do a disservice to the stories told within this study which deserve to be shared? In being guided by theoretical frameworks of feminist post-structuralism and queer theory, both concerned with disruption of normative understandings of gender, is it selfish to also want to attain some form of assimilation within the EP profession as a means of self-protection of my emotional wellbeing?

At the point of writing this reflection, these considerations have also been informed by Relationship and Sex Education guidance released by the Department for Education in July 2025, and which will come into effect from September 2026. This guidance advises schools to not, "teach as fact that all people have a gender identity" (Department for Education, 2025, p.36) and should not use external resources, "that perpetuate stereotypes or encourage pupils to question their gender" (p.37). The guidance also discourages schools from making any suggestion to pupils that social transition is a "simple solution to feelings of distress or discomfort" (p.37). There is also a complete removal of the term trans in favour of 'gender questioning' and no apparent consideration of non-binary young people's identities. Such recommendations contradict existing research into the positive aspects of supporting trans young people in school (Horton & Carlile, 2022; McGowan et al., 2022; Ferguson, 2024) and are a further example of how systemic discourses and the intra-action of assemblage elements can constrict and hinder the possibilities for positive instances of becoming for trans young people within education settings. The fact that in my professional role I am in a position to provide evidence-based and psychologically informed advice to support trans young people in schools is one which I do not take lightly, particularly given the apparent regression and biologically essentialist government guidance being provided to schools. How I positively use this position, while maintaining my own

wellbeing, is one which I am aware will require ongoing engagement in reflective and reflexive practice following completion of the doctorate training course.

Conclusion

As part of this reflective chapter, I have discussed the initial and continuing motivations for undertaking this study, with particular consideration given to the impact that exploring the storied narratives of a trans young person can have in providing them with an increased sense of agency over their own lived experiences. I have reflected on the emotional impact on myself as a researcher and how I have engaged in reflective and reflexive practices which foreground discourse as a means to make meaning of my own experiences of completing this research. I have also reflected upon how the narrative threads of community and visibility have manifested themselves within my own storied narratives, both in personal, professional and academic contexts, and how this can aid in gaining a deeper insight into the ecosystemic factors which impact trans identities. Lastly, consideration has been given to how dissemination of the study's findings can be effectively achieved within a cultural landscape which increasingly privileges cisnormative understandings of identity to an increasingly hostile degree.

It feels appropriate that the final reflection should relate to my experience of sharing the research space with Euryale. I was, and continue to be, profoundly moved by the reflective, articulate and resilient manner in which she narrated her stories into the context of the research assemblage. My primary hope moving forward is that as she plugs into other existing assemblages (at school, in her social life, at home) or those yet to be formed, she continues to experience positive instances of community, feels increasingly comfortable with instances of visibility, and develops an increasingly secure sense of her own identity. It is also my hope that in reading her stories, it inspires other professionals to work to create the conditions for these positive experiences of affirmation and belonging to take place for other trans young people.

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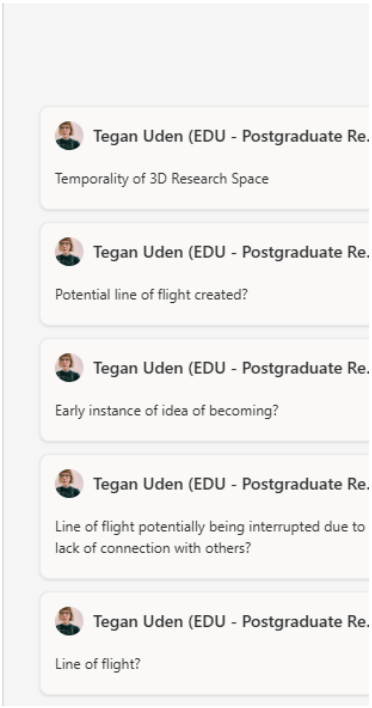
Appendices

Appendix A: Interview texts examined for potential lines of flight and instances of becoming

E: I'm not particularly active on social media, like I don't post stuff usually and I don't use, like, stuff like Instagram or Snapchat, and all that kind of thing. Really, the only social media type of things I use are like YouTube and uh and like occasionally Reddit. Mm hmm. Umm but like, especially early on in transition like before I was out to anyone that was really how I like learnt about like...just my sense of, like, what the trans community was because, like, it was before I really knew many trans people. I knew, like a couple, but not like that personally. Um, so it kind of informed my like perception of like just trans people as a whole. Hmm.

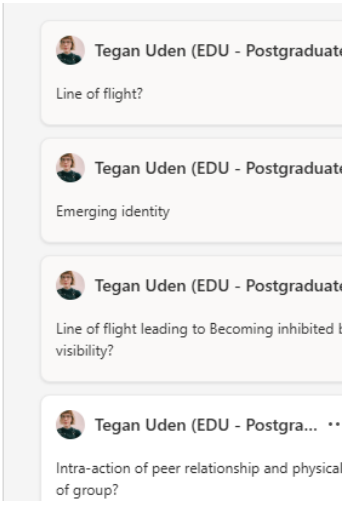
T: And was that sort of what kind of period was that, would you say that you were kind of finding was it kind of information you were finding out kind of connecting with other people in terms of talking to them or what did that look like?

E: It it was more, it was more just like...like watching. Like there was like...I didn't really. I don't really like stuff and I don't post stuff, ever really. I don't really. And I don't, like, talk to people online that frequently unless in like very specific scenarios, mainly my friends. Uh but like. It was just like kind of like knowing that that, like other trans people are out there and like getting...it was before I was really friends with any and I didn't...I only really, I only really knew like one trans person my age and like I wasn't very close friends with them so. Yeah.



T: Was that something you wanted to go to before but didn't feel able to? Well, you didn't really want to. I just wondered what was happening in that kind of gap between you. Kind of. Yeah, maybe starting to think around kind of your identity at school and attending the club.

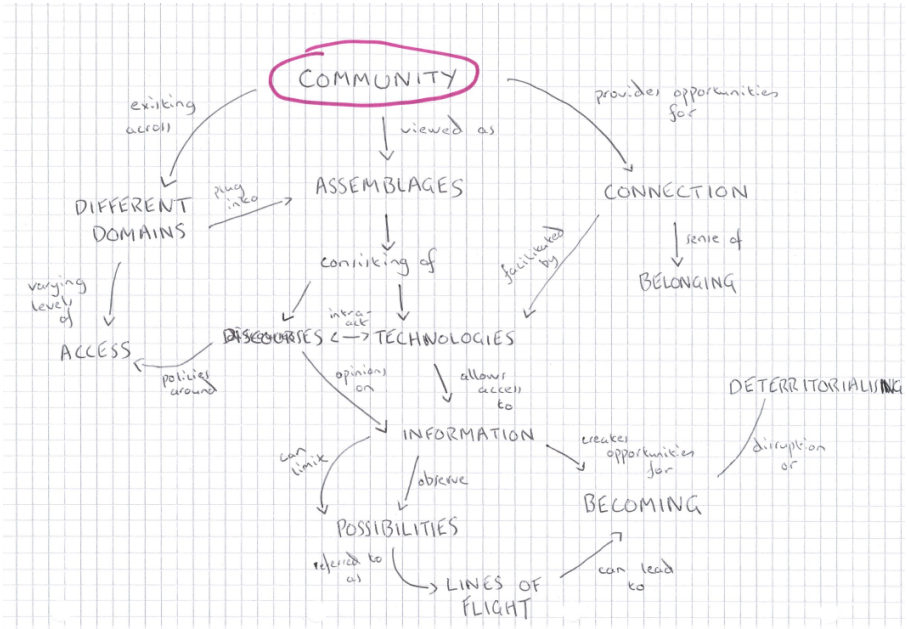
E: Like I went there, I was able to go. I was able to go there before because I was identifying as bisexual. I've been doing up until relatively recently because it was. It was just easier to like, just keep saying I'm bi rather than like, ducking out the last minute because I only realised I was like a lesbian up like right before I came out, so it would be weird just to be like oh guys, I'm actually not bi and then like a week later, be like psych. I'm trans, so I was still identifying as bi up until very recently. And then so I could have gone, I just didn't really didn't want to at that time because like I couldn't have, I didn't feel ready to like share my like trans identity. So I just had to. Like I would have just been like perceived as just cis and bi by which like I didn't really feel like particularly. And then also I have other friends who aren't queer and didn't want to go to it.

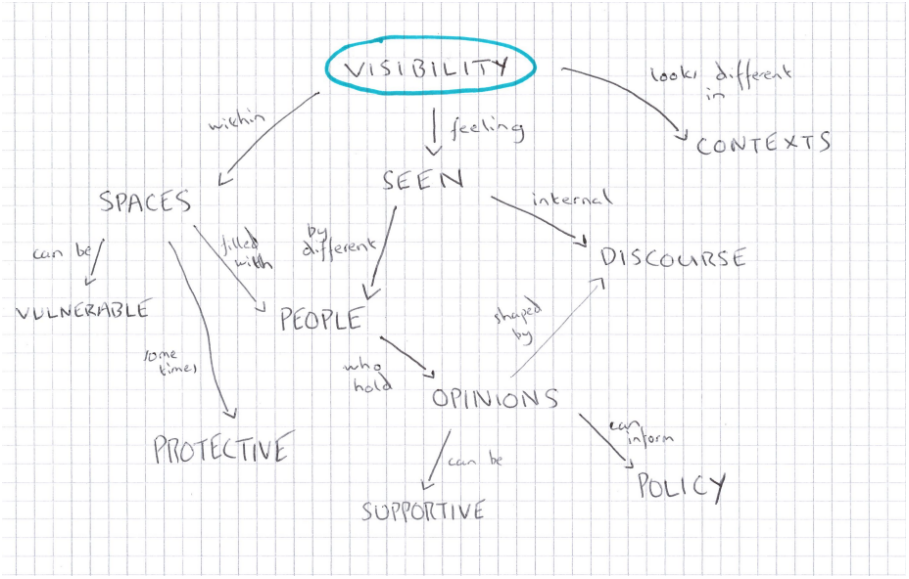


Appendix B: Example of moving from interim narratives to restoried narratives and exploring potential narrative resonances

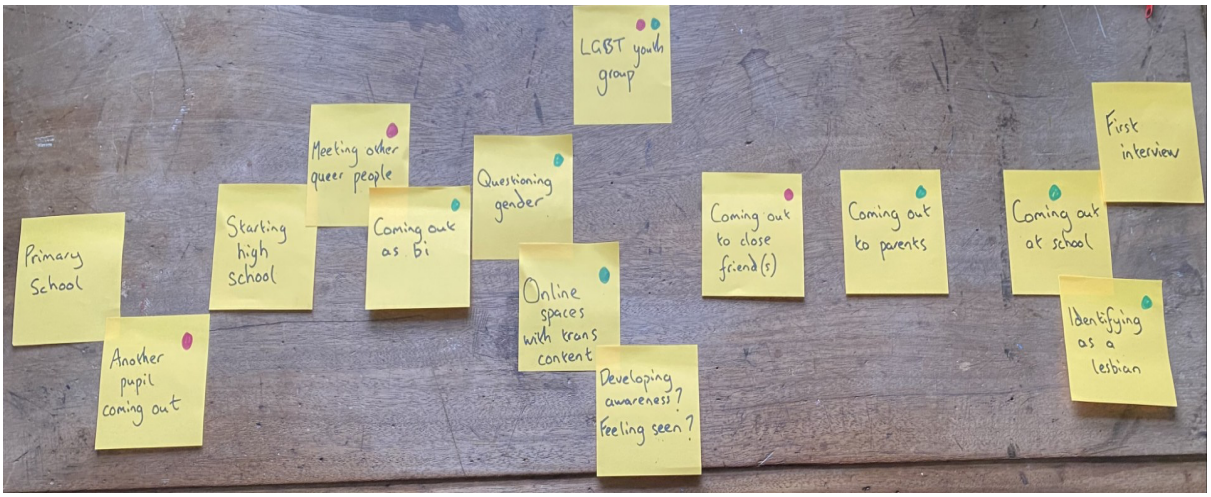
Interim narrative	Field text extract	Restoried narrative	Narrative resonance
Different types of visibility	*"especially early on in transition like before I was out to anyone that was really how I like learnt about like…just my sense of, like, what the trans community"* *"I didn't really get that much, that many chances to interact with queer people outside my immediate friend group, and that's why I really turned to online spaces"* *"there'll definitely be like a change in like how they view me. But there really kind of, wasn't."* *"We weren't really taught about like, LGBTQ issues and struggles and like identities"* *"It's nice knowing that like there are adults that are like. That have been in similar situations like similar identities to us"* *"Because I'm still in the boys changing room, but I have a little annex. That is like my annex that people aren't like, allowed to go into"*	Euryale's early time in school did not feature many representations of LGBTQ+ identities and while this wasn't really an issue at the time, as she progressed into high school, she began wishing to seek out information and potentially other people like her who could contribute to her developing identity. This did turn out to be helpful but transferring this new knowledge and sense of self into real world situations made her feel nervous and apprehensive, particularly around other's reactions. However, friends and seeing other people like her in her immediate surroundings has helped to reduce some her initial fears. Her school have also been able to put things in place to support her, such as giving her additional privacy in the changing room.	What does it mean to *be* seen and how is this different from *feeling* seen? How does recognition of outward appearance differ from recognition of one's internal identity? How is visibility affirming and how can it be a problem?

Appendix C: Examples of guiding assemblage maps





Appendix D: Timeline activity



Colours on each post-it-note represent different initial narratives which were discussed with Euryale and agreed during the activity. Maroon represents an event which involved connection or visibility provided by peers. Blue represents personal or internal moments which felt momentous, typically instances of coming out, but also when she began questioning her gender identity. Green represents something external to school which felt important, in this instance "different types of space" (online and a youth group).

Appendix E: Example research journal entries

Ahead of the interview:

- Reflecting on the impact on reading literature, and the impact this has had on my perceptions going into this first interview.
- Reflexive process about trying to let P1's stories be the initial guide but acknowledging how they are situated with the current past, present and future as described by Clandinin & Connelly.
- Consideration of how the idea of the *place* (situation) may impact the stories told. Will it bring greater freedom by having the discussion away from the main site of the experience and story?
- Judging the balance for this first interview about how much to 'move inward' (feelings, reactions, etc.) and how much to 'move outward' (existential conditions and the environment).

After the first interview:

Struck by their openness; how they were able to articulate some of their experiences and stories thus far. Maybe the timing worked well, having recently come out at school, maybe this confidence (freedom?) resulted in a less guarded or unsure response. Also, I am reflecting on my positionality as a researcher who is trans and to what extent this further enabled S's openness. I certainly feel humble, and quite emotional, to hear S's stories – especially ones so recent – told firsthand. Perhaps there is a link to be drawn with what S said about seeing other experiences of trans life and her resonating with that? Perhaps I, during the interview, represented a trans experience that she could see in real life, and this led to her talking more freely?

They spoke about resonating with other experiences they saw online, and I wondered to what extent this both supported their sense of developing identity and their confidence, this feeling of resonance with other trans young people? Yet also I wonder how much of this informed their fear around what coming out would be like?

Interview 2 – 28.2.25

Ahead of the interview:

- Reflecting on some of the stories that are already being told: the importance of community; E's evolving identity; the process of her coming out at school. All of these stories seem to exist across different points of the three-dimensional research space. Moving inwards, her feelings and I am still thinking about her verbalizing that with each person she came out to, she feels more happy and more confident. How this has mirrored some of my own experiences. I wonder if there are elements which have not gone so well? Is she not disclosing these if so or is this my projection that there *must* be elements which are bad because that is what the wider narrative would have us believe (moving outwards in the 3D research space). Also thinking about how she talked about her fear of losing things/people because of coming out and how this also mirrors my own fears and some of my reality.
- How have things been for E in the time since the previous interview?

After the second interview:

Found elements of E's stories very difficult to hear. How many other 15-year-olds are aware, let alone able to eloquently talk about, the practice of sending trans women to male prisons and the belief that, in some countries at least, this is linked to forced rape as a form of corrective punishment? Of communities online that view trans people as 'authentic' if they have medically transitioned? What does this do to a trans young person's sense of self? Impact of minority stress?

I was also really struck by E's discussion of using humor to mitigate impact difficulties.

The school probably does more than E referenced in our first interview, just based on some of her responses this time? Change this emergent thread around school experience?

Appendix F: Ethics approval

Application ID: ETH2425-1051 (significant amendments)

Dear Tegan,

Your application was considered on 25th November 2024 by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee).

The decision is: **approved**.

You are therefore able to start your project subject to any other necessary approvals being given.

This approval will expire on **1st August 2025**.

Please note that your project is granted ethics approval only for the length of time identified above. Any extension to a project must obtain ethics approval by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Tegan Uden (EDU - Postgraduate Researc continuing.

It is a requirement of this ethics approval that you should report any adverse events which occur during your project to the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) as soon as possible. An adverse event is one which was not anticipated in the research design, and which could potentially cause risk or harm to the participants or the researcher, or which reveals potential risks in the treatment under evaluation. For research involving animals, it may be the unintended death of an animal after trapping or carrying out a procedure.

Any amendments to your submitted project in terms of design, sample, data collection, focus etc. should be notified to the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) in advance to ensure ethical compliance. If the amendments are substantial a new application may be required.

Approval by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) should not be taken as evidence that your study is compliant with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. If you need guidance on how to make your study UK GDPR compliant, please contact the UEA Data Protection Officer (dataprotection@uea.ac.uk).

I would like to wish you every success with your project.

Appendix G: Parental consent form

Ms Tegan Uden

Faculty of Social Sciences
School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia
Norwich Research Park
Norwich NR4 7TJ
United Kingdom

Email: tegan.uden@uea.ac.uk
Web: www.uea.ac.uk

30.09.2024

Understanding how LGBTQ+ pupils experience inclusion at school

PARENTAL/GUARDIAN INFORMATION SHEET

(1) What is this study about?
Your child is invited to take part in a research study about their experiences attending school as an LGBTQ+ young person aged 12-18. Your child has been invited to participate in this study because they have indicated that they identify as LGBTQ+ and are aged 12-18. This Participant Information Sheet tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to let your child take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

- Understand what you have read.
- Agree for your child to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- Agree to the use of your child's personal information as described.
- You have received a copy of this Participant Information Sheet to keep.

(2) Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by Ms Tegan Uden, Postgraduate Researcher.
This will take place under the supervision of XXXX, lecturer (XXXX).

Both persons are based within the School of Education and Lifelong Learning at the University of East Anglia.

(3) What will the study involve for my child?
Your child has indicated that they would like to take part in this research. They meet the criteria because they identify as LGBTQ+, are aged 12-18, and are currently attending a UK secondary school. Your child will be asked to take part in a minimum of two interviews with me. Your child can choose whether these interviews are in person or online. If they choose in person, I can complete the interviews at school or in another public location, for example at a local library or at their youth group. If the interview is at a location not at their school I will ask that you accompany them to and from the location. If your child chooses online, I will use Microsoft Teams. I will ask your child to be in a space where they won't be interrupted or overheard, and to wear headphones. I will ask that you are in the building where they are conducting the online interview.

Your child will also be asked to bring an item to the first interview, if they want to, which represents 'inclusion' to them. Your child will also be asked to complete some drawing activities with me if they want to.

You will not have the opportunity to review information generated about your child prior to publication.

4. **How much of my child's time will the study take?**

Each interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes. This will include the interview and then reviewing the things we have spoken about to check that I have understood the things your child has told me.

We will have a minimum of two interviews. If your child feel they would like more interview time, or more interviews but of a shorter length, we can discuss this and try and arrange it.

(5) Does my child have to be in the study? Can my child withdraw from the study once they have started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and your child does not have to take part.
Your decision on whether your child participates will not affect your current or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.

If you decide to let your child take part in the study and then change your mind later (or they no longer wish to take part), they are free to withdraw from the study at any time and you can withdraw your consent up to the point that your data is fully anonymised. You can do this either in person or via email using the address above.

(6) What are the consequences if my child withdraws from the study?

Your child is free to stop the interview at any time. Unless you say that you want us to keep them, any recordings will be erased and the information your child has provided will not be included in the study results. Your child may also refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer during the interview. If you decide at a later time to withdraw your child from the study your information will be removed from our records and will not be included in any results, up to the point we have analysed and published the results.

(7) Are there any risks or costs associated with my child being in the study?

During the interviews, topics may come up which feel upsetting or difficult for your child to discuss. If this is the case, they can choose not to continue talking about the topic if they do not want to.

(8) Are there any benefits associated with my child being in the study?

Some young people find that talking about their experiences can feel like a helpful thing for them and this may be the case for your child.

(9) What will happen to information provided by my child and data collected during the study?

Your child's personal data and information will only be used as outlined in this Participant Information Sheet, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA 2018) and UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), and the University of East Anglia's Research Data Management Policy.

Your child's information will be stored securely, and their identity will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings may be published and may also be used for other scholarly and educational purposes such as in teaching, but your child will not be identified if you consent to them participating in this study. The data will be kept for at least 10 years beyond the last date the data is used.

(10) What if we would like further information about the study?
When you have read this information, if you have any further questions about the study, you can email Tegan Uden at tegan.uden@uea.ac.uk or contact her research supervisor XXXX at XXXX who will be available to discuss it with you further.

(11) Will my child be told the results of the study?
If they want to, I will provide your child with a one-page overview of the key themes identified as part of the study which will be form part of their debrief.

(12) What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?
If there is a problem please let me know. You can contact me via the University of East Anglia at the following address:

Ms Tegan Uden
School of Education and Lifelong Learning
University of East Anglia
NORWICH NR4 7TJ

You may also contact my supervisor, XXXX, via email at XXXX

If you (or your child) are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact the Head of School of Education and Lifelong Learning: Yann Lebeau (Y.Lebeau@uea.ac.uk) (,).

(13) How do we know that this study has been approved to take place?
To protect your safety, rights, wellbeing and dignity, all research in the University of East Anglia is reviewed by a Research Ethics Body. This research was approved by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee).

(14) What is the general data protection information my child needs to be informed about?
According to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis for processing your data as listed in Article 6(1) of the UK GDPR is because this allows us to process personal data when it is necessary to perform our public tasks as a University.

In addition to the specific information provided above about why your child's personal data is required and how it will be used, there is also some general information which needs to be provided

for you:

- The data controller is the University of East Anglia.
- For further information, you can contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk
- You can also find out more about your child's data protection rights at the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO).

- If you are unhappy with how your child's personal data has been used, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk in the first instance.

(15) OK, I am happy for my child to take part – what do I do next?
You need to fill in one copy of the consent form and return it to tegan.uden@uea.ac.uk
Please keep the letter, information sheet and the second copy of the consent form for your information.

(16) Further information
This information was last updated on 30.09.24.

If there are changes to the information provided, you will be notified by email.

This information sheet is for you to keep

PARENTAL/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM (First Copy to Researcher)

I, ...[PRINT PARENT'S/GUARDIAN'S NAME], consent to my child …… [PRINT CHILD'S NAME] participating in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- I understand the purpose of the study, what my child will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- I have read the Parental/Guardian Information Sheet and have been able to discuss my child's involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
- The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
- I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and my child does not have to take part. My decision whether to let them take part in the study will not affect our relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.
- I understand that my child can withdraw from the study at any time.
- I understand that my child may stop the interview at any time if they do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study results. I also understand that my child may refuse to answer any questions they don't wish to answer.
- I understand that the results of this study will be used in the way described in the information sheet.
- I understand that personal information about my child that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about my child will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.

I consent to:

Audio-recording of my child YES ☐ NO ☐

Video-recording of my child YES ☐ NO ☐

My child reviewing transcripts YES ☐ NO ☐

Photographs being taken of my child's drawings YES ☐ NO ☐

Photographs of any items my child brings to the interview YES ☐ NO ☐

The data collected in this study may be deposited with a repository to allow it to be made available for scholarly and educational purposes, but the data will only be used in the way that it is described in the information sheet.

I consent to: Deposit of data in a repository YES ☐ NO ☐

.....
Signature

.....
PRINT name

.....
Date

Appendix H: Child and young person consent form

How LGBTQ+ pupils experience inclusion

Study Information Sheet

Hello. My name is Tegan Uden and I am a Post-graduate researcher at the University of East Anglia. My pronouns are she/her.

I am doing a study to find out more about the experiences of LGBTQ+ young people aged 12-18, particularly their experiences of inclusion at their school.
I am asking you to be in my study because you identify with one or more of the identities which comes under the LGBTQ+ umbrella and are aged 12-18.
You can decide if you want to take part in the study or not, it's up to you.
This sheet tells you what I will ask you to do if you decide to take part in this study. Please read it carefully.
If you decide you want to be in the study and then you change your mind later, that's ok. All you need to do is tell me that you don't want to be in the study anymore. We will not be able to remove any information you may have already provided. You or your parent/carer can email me at tegan.uden@uea.ac.uk
If you have any questions you can speak to me during the study or to your parent/carer.

What will happen if I say that I want to be in the study?

If you decide that you want to be in my study, I will ask you to do these things:

- If you are aged 12-15 I will also request consent from your parent or legal guardian. Unfortunately, if you do not feel able to, or cannot, gain parental consent and are aged 12-15 you won't be able to take part in this study.
- Take part in a minimum of two interviews with me.
- You can choose whether these interviews are in person or online.
- If you choose in person, we can complete the interviews at school, at the youth group you attend, or in another location such as a local library, depending on where you heard about the study.
- If you choose online, I will use software called Microsoft Teams. I will ask you to be in a space where you won't be interrupted or overheard, and to wear headphones. If you are aged 12-15 I will ask that your parent or legal guardian is present in the same building.

When I ask you questions, you can choose which ones you want to answer. If you don't want to talk about something, that's ok. You can stop talking to me at any time if you don't want to talk to me anymore.

If you say it's ok, I will record what you say with an audio recorder.

If you say it's ok, if you have chosen an online interview, I will record the interview.

If it's ok with you, I will ask you to carry out some drawing or writing activities together. I will also ask you to bring along an object to the interview which represents 'inclusion' to you. You can decide which activities you want to take part in and can stop at any time. If It's okay with you, I will take photos of whatever you make or bring.

Will anyone else know what I say in the study?

I won't tell anyone else what you say to me, except if you talk about someone hurting you or about you hurting yourself or someone else. Then I might need to tell someone outside of the study to keep you and other people safe.

All the information that I have about you from the study will be stored in a safe place and I will look after it very carefully. I will write a report about the study and show it to other people, but I won't put your name in the report, and no one will know that you're in the study. I may also share your information with other researchers, but I will take out your name.

How long will the study take?

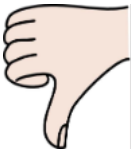
Each interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes. This will include the interview and then reviewing the things we have spoken about to check that I have understood the things you have told me.

We will have a minimum of two interviews. If you feel you would like more interview time, we can discuss this and try and arrange it. It may be that you would also like to have shorter interviews but more of them; this is also something we can discuss.

Are there any good things about being in the study?

Some young people find that talking about their experiences can feel like a helpful thing for them and this may be the case for you. You may not feel this way, but you will be helping me do my research.

Are there any bad things about being in the study?



During the interviews, topics may come up which feel upsetting or difficult to discuss. If this is the case, you can choose not to continue talking about the topic if you do not want to. If you feel that you need support to discuss anything after the interviews you may wish to contact one of the following services:

- Switchboard (*Homepage | Switchboard)*
- Young Minds (*YoungMinds | Mental Health Charity For Children And Young People | YoungMinds)*
- GALOP (*Galop - the LGBT+ anti-abuse charity)*

Will you tell me what you learned in the study at the end?

Yes, I will if you want me to. There is a question on the next page that asks you if you want me to tell you what I learned in the study. If you circle Yes, when I finish the study, I will tell you what I learned.

What if I am not happy with the study or the people doing the study?

If you are not happy with how I am doing the study or how I treat you, then you or your parent/carer can:

- Tell me during the study.
- Email me at tegan.uden@uea.ac.uk

- Contact my supervisor Ryan Cullen at ryan.cullen@uea.ac.uk
- Email my Head of School Yann Lebeau at Y.Lebeau@uea.ac.uk

How do I know that this study is ok to take part in?

All research I undertake is checked and approved by an Ethics Committee at the University of East Anglia before I can start it.

What if I want to know more about the information collected on me in the study?

When we talk in the study, I will collect some information which is unique to you. I can only collect this information if I have a reason to do so. My reason to do so for this study is because the study is in the public interest.

This information is stored by me within the University of East Anglia. They help me protect your information and look after it.

If you want to know more about the information collected about you, you can email **tegan.uden@uea.ac.uk** or you can email the University's Data Protection Officer (dataprotection@uea.ac.uk) who helps to protect your information. The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) helps to protect everyone's information. If you are unhappy with mine or the University Data Protection Officer's responses about your information, you can speak to the ICO.

Further information

This sheet was last updated on 30.09.24. I will update you if I make any changes to this sheet.

This information sheet is for you to keep.

Participant Consent Form (*First Copy to Researcher*)

If you are happy to be in the study, please:

- **write** your **name** in the space below.
- **sign** your **name** at the bottom of the next page.
- put the **date** at the bottom of the next page.

You should only say 'yes' to being in the study if you know what it is about and you want to be in it. If you don't want to be in the study, don't sign the form.
I, ... [PRINT NAME], am happy to be in this research study.
In saying yes to being in the study, I am saying that:

- I know what the study is about.
- I know what I will be asked to do.
- Someone has talked to me about the study.
- My questions have been answered.
- I know that I don't have to be in the study if I don't want to.
- I know that I can pull out of the study at any time if I don't want to do it anymore and it will not possible to remove any information I have already provided.
- I know that I don't have to answer any questions that I don't want to answer.
- I know that the researchers won't tell anyone what I say when I talk to them unless I talk about being hurt by someone or hurting myself or someone else.

Now I am going to ask you circle 'Yes' or 'No' to tell me what you are happy to do or not do in the study.

Are you happy to **speak just to me**? **Yes** **No**

Are you happy for me to record interviews on **video**? **Yes** **No**

Are you happy for me to **audio record** your voice? **Yes** **No**

Are you happy to come along to **take part in drawing or writing activities with me**?

Yes **No**

Are you happy for me to take a photograph of any item you bring along or of something you draw?
Yes No

Do you want me to tell you what I **learned** in the study? **Yes** **No**

…….. ……
Signature **Date**

Appendix I: Recruitment poster

UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF LGBTQ+ PUPILS AT SCHOOL

DO YOU IDENTIFY AS LGBTQ+ AND ARE AGED 12-18? IF YES, WOULD YOU BE WILLING TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH EXPLORING DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES OF INCLUSION?

For more information and to express an interest in participating, please email lead researcher Tegan Uden at tegan.uden@uea.ac.uk

This research has been approved by the School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee at the University of East Anglia (ETH2324-1367)

Appendix J: Participant debrief form

Participant debrief explanation

Thank you for taking part in this research project. Your involvement has been very useful, and I hope that you have also found the experience positive. If there have been any topics which you have found difficult and would like to seek further support around, you may wish to speak to a trusted adult at your school such as your form tutor or the SENCo. Alternatively, you may wish to seek support from one of the following services:

- Switchboard (*Homepage | Switchboard)*
- Young Minds (*YoungMinds | Mental Health Charity For Children And Young People | YoungMinds)*
- GALOP (*Galop - the LGBT+ anti-abuse charity)*

Please take some time to review the key points and interpretations which I have made based on the interview transcripts. Please read through this summary to check for accuracy and we can discuss any of the points mentioned.

Tegan Uden – Lead researcher

Tegan.uden@uea.ac.uk