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Positive Discoveries: Identity Development and the Experiences of Gifted LGBTQ+ Students in Ireland

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ABSTRACT

This article outlines findings from a mixed methods study, which aims to address this lacuna in the field of gifted education research, by providing insight into the experiences of gifted LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) young people, in Ireland. Participants were asked the same set of questions regarding two sites; post-primary school and a gifted summer program. Over three methods of data collection (anonymous questionnaire, focus groups and interviews) the experiences of gifted LGBTQ+ adolescents ($N = 120$) were explored. The mean age of participants was 18.4. Using thematic analysis of the qualitative data, four superordinate themes were identified, all of which related to identity development for gifted LGBTQ+ adolescents. The study's key finding across both the quantitative and qualitative data was that peers and staff at a gifted enrichment program had a more positive effect on identity development than their school-based equivalent. This study was guided by the transformative paradigm, which places central importance on the lives and experiences of marginalized communities, uses transformative theory to develop the inquiry approach and links results of social inquiry to action. As the first set of data on the experiences of gifted LGBTQ+ students in Ireland and one of the first of its kind outside the United States, it is hoped that findings from this research will benefit all educators working with this student population while expanding both the field of gifted education research and research on the experiences of LGBTQ+ adolescents.

Introduction

Although research and research interest in the experiences of gifted lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ+) individuals is gradually increasing, the field remains small, particularly compared to other subfields within gifted education. This is perhaps surprising, given the increase in gifted adolescents who identify as LGBTQ+. Gifted LGBTQ+ focused literature is also almost entirely based within the United States.

This article reports on a mixed methods study, which explored the experiences of gifted LGBTQ+ adolescents in Ireland, comparing their experiences at school and within a gifted program. The participant sample was composed of post-primary students (ages 13–18) and recent university students (ages 18–23), who had been identified as gifted (via either psychological testing or Talent Search) and

attended a gifted summer program. Participants were recruited through a gifted education organization and asked about their experiences on the organization's summer program. The findings of the research study reflected previous research on the impact of gifted summer programs, but expanded upon this within specific questions on the experiences of LGBTQ+ students on these gifted programs.

The gifted program referenced throughout this article is Centre for Talented Youth, Ireland (CTYI) based within Dublin City University. In Ireland, there are no standardized provisions for gifted students in the Irish education system or any government funding for gifted education programs. CTYI is Ireland's only formal gifted education program and is completely self-funded.

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The study aimed to explore the experiences of gifted LGBTQ+ adolescents in Ireland, within a school setting and the setting of a gifted program, and to understand the effects of each environment on identity development. Guided by the transformative paradigm, the author's focus was to integrate the findings of this research into practice within the gifted program and to utilize these findings to create a model of best practice for other educational settings. The study also aimed to address a lacuna in the field of gifted LGBTQ+ research, as the first set of data outside of a United States context.

Gifted LGBTQ+ literature review [1]

While the field of gifted LGBTQ+ research is still relatively small, advocacy in this area has been active for many years. This is evidenced by the presence of position papers from gifted education advocacy groups and organizations (NAGC, SENG), opinion pieces (Eriksson et al., (2005); Friedrichs, (1997; Tolan, 1997), broad literature reviews Cohn (2003); Friedrichs (2012); Sedillo (2015); Stewart (2006); Treat and Whittenburg (2006) and practical advice for educators (Sedillo, 2018b; Treat, 2017). Empirical research with this minority group is increasing, particularly within the last decade (Hutcheson & Tieso, 2014; Lo et al., 2021; Sedillo, 2018a; Sewell, 2019; Tuite et al., 2021; Wikoff et al., 2021). Identity development is a common theme across the literature and was affected by experiences of being outside the social norm, peer relationships, support structures and mental health.

In terms of identity development, gifted LGBTQ + adolescents often go through a process of considering identity interactions and how to present various aspects of their identity in differing social situations. Gifted LGBTQ+ students may desire to push their high ability to the forefront, in order to deflect attention from their sexual orientation or gender identity (Wexelbaum & Hoover, 2014). The continuum of visibility (Cross, 1997; Cross et al., 1991) is a framework that is particularly relevant for gifted LGBTQ+ students, who must choose whether to hide and deny, or express and embrace,

their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Fear of social repercussions had a significant effect on the identity development for participants in Tuite et al. (2021), in particular, fear of rejection on coming out, alienation, prejudice and harassment. Gifted individuals live in a world of mixed messages, encouraged to highly achieve yet also sometimes ostracized for standing out (Cross, 2011). This lack of clear social norms can lead to uncertainty and anxiety, particularly when a gifted student is also LGBTQ+ (Reidl Cross & Cross, 2015) and may require interventions to prevent bullying and to promote self-esteem (Kerr & Multon, 2015). Gifted adolescents who are isolated (for example, as part of one or multiple minority groups) may be at a greater risk of severe mental health issues (Cross et al., 2002; Sedillo, 2018a). The transgender interviewee in Sedillo's (2018a) case study stated that he thought of committing suicide 10 times during his lifetime, the first time being when he was 12 years old. While some gifted LGBTQ+ students may use overachievement or overinvolvement in extracurricular activities as coping strategies, others engage in self-destructive and risky behaviors in order to fit in (Hutcheson & Tieso, 2014; Peterson & Rischar, 2000). Some participants in Peterson & Rischar's (2000) study became overly involved in school in order to create structure and balance and to distract themselves from fears regarding coming out.

Without a supportive environment, which acknowledges and supports their talents and skills, gifted students generally can engage in inappropriate coping strategies, such as denying their talents, underachieving, or masking their giftedness from classmates to gain peer acceptance (Cross & Swiatek, 2009). Although addressing broad societal challenges for young gifted LGBTQ+ students is beyond the remit of most school counselors, an awareness of issues and challenges can have a positive impact on a counselor's understanding of their student (Friedrichs, 2012).

Gifted summer programs and residential programs can significantly impact academic achievement, as well as the socioemotional development of gifted students generally (Kim, 2016). For gifted LGBTQ+ students, these types of immersive

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[1]For an extended review of gifted LGBTQ+ literature, see Dunne (2023).

experiences can provide the opportunity to meet peers, increase self-confidence and form deeper relationships. One participant in Hutcheson and Tieso's (2014) study connected his experience at a gifted summer program with a newfound awareness that the world was larger and more accepting than he realized, which encouraged him to persevere through homophobic harassment and bullying at school.

Method

This article describes the findings from a mixed methods study, which explored the experiences of gifted LGBTQ+ adolescents ($N = 120$) over three datasets; an anonymous questionnaire, interviews and focus groups. The study is embedded in the transformative paradigm, which places central importance on the lives and experiences of marginalized communities. The ontological assumption of the transformative paradigm holds that our knowledge is socially constructed and exists within the complex dynamics of power and privilege (Mertens, 2009). In terms of gifted education, the transformative mode of inquiry views knowledge as embedded in a cultural matrix of values and power relationships grounded in struggles around gender, race, social class, and other culturally and economically determined variables (Cross, 2003). The transformative paradigm places central importance on the experiences of diverse groups that have been traditionally marginalized for qualities like gender and sexual orientation (Mertens, 2010) while advancing an agenda for change that will improve the lives of those oppressed and alienated (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

A mixed methods approach was chosen as it creates an interactive link between researchers and participants, which is an important aspect of the transformative paradigm (Mertens, 2009), while the survey instrument was adapted to be more culturally relevant (Jackson et al., 2018). The findings presented in this article are largely from the qualitative data collected.

Researcher statement

The author is part of the community of participants within this study in several ways; as a queer person, as a former student of the gifted program referenced and as a current staff member of the same program. Research from within a community can offer an opportunity to ground the work in issues as those involved experience them, enabling the researcher to learn, reflect and act on the study's findings (Smyth & Holian, 2008), which certainly occurred within this study. The transformative paradigm acknowledges that there is a power differential present between researcher and participant and furthermore, that sustained involvement with the community should be engaged in order to gain trust (Mertens, 2009). The author has worked directly with some of the students who participated in the study for several years and was solely responsible for designing and implementing the gifted organization's first policy related to gender identity. However, there is value in considering (and continuously reconsidering) positionality, therefore a research diary was kept in order to self-examine any predispositions.

Ethical approval

The study received full ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee at Dublin City University.

Participants

Recruitment details were sent by both e-mail and postal mail to former students (over 18 years of age) and to parents of current students (under 18 years of age). A purposeful sampling strategy was used, based on the rationale that the gifted students at Centre for Talented Youth, Ireland (CTYI) embodied two of the relevant characteristics to the study (gifted and adolescent), with participants self-identifying the third characteristic (LGBTQ+). Former students were invited in order to increase the potential sample size and as their experiences on the program and in post-primary school was relatively recent. Some snowball sampling also occurred, as participants spoke to friends about the project.

Results from the online anonymous questionnaire were collected approximately 3 months after the initial survey was sent. In the initial recruitment mailing, participants were also invited to submit

a Google Form if they wished to be contacted regarding interviews and focus groups. This form received 18 responses, all of whom were then contacted with details and an additional assent form. The final number of interview and focus group participants was 12, as 6 initial respondents chose not to participate. Interviews and focus groups took place subsequently.

The final sample was 120 adolescents, with a mean age of 18.4 (s = 1.5), who had been identified as gifted through their attendance at CTYI and who self-identified as LGBTQ+. An additional 35 participants completed the questionnaire but did not identify as LGBTQ+, therefore their responses were excluded. In terms of gifted identification, students must undergo assessment in order to enter these programs, placing within the 95th percentile or above, in either verbal or mathematical reasoning. This is ascertained using the Talent Search process (above-level testing).[2] Increasingly, students are also referred to the Centre via a private educational psychologist, who will have administered intelligence tests such as the WISC-V or Stanford Binet and achieved scores in the same percentile. Participants were asked whether they identified as LGBTQ+ and if yes, to include details.

Instrument

The study's online questionnaire was based on the GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network) Local Climate Survey (LCS), which has been used and adapted by other researchers and LGBTQ+ advocacy groups (Adelman & Woods, 2006; Pizmony-Levy & Kosciw, 2016; Gato et al., 2020), including by BeLonG To, the largest youth LGBTQ+ advocacy group in Ireland (BeLonG To Youth Services & Pizmony-Levy, 2019). The questionnaire poses a parallel series of closed-ended questions about negative remarks students have heard in school about sexual orientation and gender identity. Students are also asked closed-ended questions about how safe they feel in school. Some adaptations were made for cultural context (e.g. change in terms such as "locker room") and new open text questions added, in order to align with a mixed methods form of inquiry. One significant

change was the change from asking students about the frequency of hearing various LGBTQ+ slurs (with slurs listed), in favor of an open text box to include examples of negative language heard.

Interviews were semi-structured and included questions on the participant's experiences in school, at the gifted program, with peers and on their own identity (e.g. "How often do you/did you hear negative remarks toward or about LGBTQ+ people in your school?" "Where do you feel most comfortable expressing your LGBTQ+ identity?"). Eight interviews took place over a week, with the average interview taking around an hour. After each interview, a follow-up e-mail was sent expressing gratitude, offering a list of supports (should any interviewee require them) and welcoming further contact, should any thoughts or questions arise. While some participants did discuss difficult experiences, there were no immediate issues of concern and most participants expressed their enjoyment of the session. The focus group question schedule reflected that of the questionnaire, with ample space to allow new directions of discussion to arise. While the focus groups had the lowest response rate, the contributions added to the overall study data.

By using a mixed methods approach, quantitative and qualitative data could be integrated to examine the research questions on school climate. The collected quantitative data also allowed an examination of the diverse sexual orientation and gender identities amongst the population, while the qualitative data allowed deeper interrogation of the meaning of these identities and the experiences of gifted LGBTQ+ young people.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection began in October 2021, with the first round of online questionnaire recruitment. Data collection was completed in April 2022, when interviews and focus groups were conducted.

The quantitative demographic data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, while the qualitative data was analyzed using inductive coding and thematic analysis. The author followed Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013) conception of thematic

[2]The Talent Search process operates as a key identification process for many gifted programs around the world (see Lee et al., 2008; Barnett & Gilheany, 2006).

analysis, namely that coding and theme development are subjective and interpretative processes and that analysis is created by the researcher at the intersection of the data, their theoretical and conceptual frameworks, disciplinary knowledge, and research skills and experience (Terry et al., 2017). An inductive approach allowed the data to lead the thematic analysis, as some qualitative data (particularly from interviews) did not follow a strict structure or moved away from the questions asked. A computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (Taguette) was then used to manage the qualitative data, develop code schemes, apply codes and organize themes.

Limitations

Although the study had a decent sample size when compared to others within the field, there is a limitation in the small number of interview and focus group participants. These participants provided stronger qualitative data than the questionnaire participants and therefore more participants would have added to the overall depth of the study.

CTYI's student population typically spend three full weeks on campus, during which time they often partake in research. Unfortunately, the recruitment for this study was required to complete within a specific time frame (doctoral program limits), which fell during COVID-19. The remote nature of this will have naturally impacted the study's recruitment rate. More participants chose to take part in interviews than in a focus group, this can perhaps be attributed to the sensitive nature of the topic and a preference for discussion to take place in a one-to-one setting. It is hoped that further iterations will benefit from the presence of students in person, on summer programs.

Findings

One of the key findings within the study was the breadth of labels adolescents use to identify within the LGBTQ+ community. Within the transformative paradigm, care should be taken to understand the dimensions of diversity in the research context, to identify strategies that remove barriers to participation and reject the homogeneity of generic labels for a complex group (Mertens, 2009); therefore, all

participants were able to self-identify their gender and sexual orientation in open text boxes. This also allowed transgender and gender non-confirming participants to identify their sexual orientation in relation to their gender identity, which is an important factor of inclusion when engaging in gender affirming research (Sevelius et al., 2017). As evidenced in the breadth of labels in Table 1 and some of the rich descriptions submitted by participants, this nuance is something which would have been lost with any generic labeled options.

Questionnaire participants represented the largest sample of the study ($n = 108$) and provided large amounts of data on the factors which created a positive or negative climate for gifted LGBTQ+ adolescents. For the purposes of this paper, a stronger focus has been given to the qualitative data from interviewees and focus group participants, who spoke more in depth about identity development.

Table 2 contains details of interviewees and focus group participants. All participants were given pseudonyms.

Using thematic analysis, four superordinate themes were identified across the qualitative data; identity cognition (identity labels), identity recognition (coming out, to oneself and others), identity rejection and identity affirmation. These themes were present across all three datasets but presented extremely strongly within the interviews and focus groups. These themes can be viewed as a journey of four steps; from internal awareness, to recognizing the identity and having it be recognized, to rejection and then affirmation. However, it is important to acknowledge that the journey is non-linear, much like identity development generally, and participants experienced each theme in different orders and within different contexts.

Identity cognition – finding (and fighting) labels

In an analysis of responses from 2,560 adolescents in California, researchers found that historically typical sexual identity labels were endorsed by the majority of non-heterosexual and non-cisgender youth in the survey, with only a third opting for labels like "questioning," "queer" or labels that described ambivalence, resistance or fluidity (Russell et al., 2009). Over 10 years later, there is compelling evidence that

Table 1. Participant demographics ($n = 120$).

Demographics	Age (years old)									Total
	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	
Total Participants	5	5	8	49	30	14	5	2	2	120
Gender										
Cisgender Female	1		2	28	11	4	2			48
Cisgender Male	1		2	11	8	4	2			28
Transgender Female				1	1	2				4
Transgender Male		1		1		2			2	6
Nonbinary	3	2	3	4	3	2		2		19
Genderfluid		1			3					4
Female/Questioning				2	1					3
Agender			1	1						2
Male/Questioning							1			1
Questioning				1						1
Queer					1					1
Nonbinary/Genderfluid		1								1
Neutrois					1					1
Transfeminine, Agender and Female					1					1
Sexual Orientation										
Asexual				2	1	1				4
Aromantic			1							1
Bisexual	1	1	3	21	9	7	4		1	47
Demisexual			1	1						2
Gay				4	3	1	1	2	1	12
Lesbian				3	2	2				7
Multiple Labels	3	2	2	8	7	1				23
Pansexual				5						5
Queer		2		2	5	2				11
Questioning	1									1
Undefined				1	3	3				7

Table 2. Interview and focus group participants.

Name	Age	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Participant Type
Benedict	23	Transgender Male	Bisexual	Interview
Carlos	20	Cisgender Male	Asexual	Interview
Dillon	19	Non binary	Queer	Interview
Enda	19	Non binary	Queer	Focus Group
Jackie	19	Genderfluid	Gay	Focus Group
Katharine	21	Cisgender Female	Bisexual	Interview
Joe	22	Non binary	Gay	Interview
Ken	18	Cisgender Male	Asexual	Focus Group
Olivia	20	Transgender Female	Lesbian	Interview
Steven	23	Transgender Male	Gay	Interview
Suzie	19	Cisgender Female	Queer	Interview

contemporary adolescents are increasingly using an expanded vocabulary to describe their gender and sexual identities (Hammack et al., 2021). Each interview participant was asked about how they identified their gender and their sexual orientation. Questionnaire participants were given open text boxes for their gender identity and how they identified as part of the LGBTQ+ community. Focus group participants were asked for their pronouns initially, to avoid putting any participants on the spot in a group environment. All eight of the interviewees identified as LGBTQ+ in some way, while three focus group participants also chose to discuss being LGBTQ+. The wide variety in answers offers distinct evidence of the benefits of allowing for open spaces to discuss gender and

sexual orientation, beyond singular labels. The most frequent gender identifier was cisgender female ($n = 48$), which accounted for almost half the total sample (40.0%) and the most frequent sexual orientation identifier was bisexual ($n = 47$), which similarly accounted for almost half the total sample (39.2%). Graph 1 is a scatter plot displaying the correlations between gender and sexuality over the participant sample.

Within the non-cisgender group, the most frequent identifier was nonbinary and participants who were younger were more likely to identify as a gender other than cisgender. In terms of the intersection of gender identity and sexual identity, I found that participants who reported gender identities other than cisgender were more
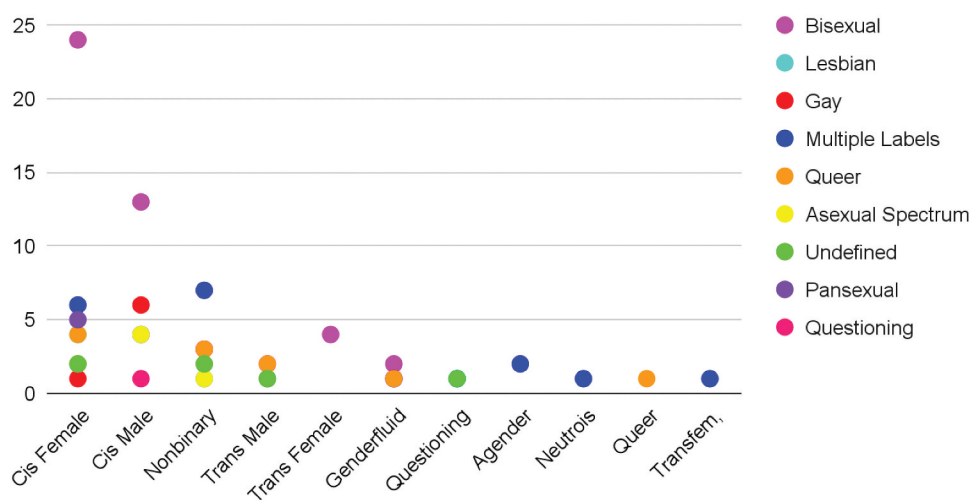
GRAPH 1. Gender and sexuality scatterplot.

likely to report multiple identifiers within the LGBTQ+ identity question. This is in line with existing research on adolescent identity that found similar combinations of traditional versus expansive gender identities and sexual orientations (White et al., 2018; Garrett-Walker & Montagno, 2021).

For the three transgender interview participants (Benedict, Olivia and Steven), each noted a desire to be seen in their gender first and being transgender second.

> Well, I'm a woman first and foremost. I am trans but like I don't introduce myself and say that. You know, I'm a girl, that's what I am! Like I'm proudly trans but if I'm introducing myself, I introduce myself as a woman first and foremost, because it's no one's business but my own. - Olivia

> I guess trans man, I just go by man at this point, I think my transition is fairly finished so it's not something I think really too much about anymore? When I was going through the process of transitioning it was something that you kind of had to think about and acknowledge, now it's such a non issue in my day to day life. - Benedict

Steven was specific in how he discerned the rank of his identity, "I'm a man first, a transgender man second and a gay man third," further elaborating on the intersection of gender identity and sexual orientation labels,

> Being gay is more related to my gender than, like, my actual sexuality . . . Because my sexuality is very much like the label queer- I don't really feel like gender is

a factor when I'm attracted to somebody. But I also feel like the gay male archetypes are very important to my gender identity, expression and my feeling of gender euphoria! - Steven

For the two nonbinary interview participants (Dillon and Joe), their descriptions of nonbinary identity involved resistance, in terms of labels and so-called traditional concepts of gender.

> I wanted to detach myself from the stereotypes and assumptions with, like, identifying as one particular thing and to be separate from everything that's already what people might assume if I gave them more information about my gender. - Dillon

> I had really specific identities when I was a teenager but now I'm happy to leave it at nonbinary because I don't like to put that much of a label on it. - Joe

Each of the non cisgender interviewees gave more nuanced descriptions of their gender, compared to their cisgender peers, perhaps as a result of having undergone a more lengthy gender reflection process.

Identity recognition – coming out

Several participants shared that the positive environment of the gifted program encouraged them to come out. One questionnaire participant connected this to a feeling of inclusion.

> It was one of the first places I felt comfortable expressing my sexuality and in coming out to friends, I never felt like I would be judged or like I was "weird" or "other."

Another questionnaire participant noted that the positive experience led to greater self-esteem.

> I came out much quicker and with much less internalised shame that I think I would've without attending the programme, it made discovering myself an actually positive experience.

For the interview participants, each spoke broadly about their experiences of coming out, which were quite different. For Suzie, entering university had a significant effect, as it provided a new environment, which was quite different from school.

> When I left school then went to college, I think I was kind of determined to be myself more in all aspects of life. It was less that I made a choice to start telling people but more that because I was living authentically as myself that it became very obvious . . . that I wasn't straight anymore. - Suzie

Focus group participants were asked "How do you think it would have felt to come out while you were in school?." For Enda, his experience of coming out in school was positive.

> When I came out, I came out really loudly, I made sure everyone knew and that kind of meant that between second and third year, the amount of remarks I heard from other people shot down, because they didn't want to say anything around me I think.

Later in the conversation, Enda noted that he specifically came out during the same year of a changeover in school leadership, with a new openly gay principal, who was also a well-liked teacher within the school. This is an example of the value of leadership within a space for supporting gifted LGBTQ+ adolescents.

Enda's positive experience was in stark contrast to that of Olivia. Olivia was denied the ability to come out in her own time, as she was "outed" by peers at school who found her private social media account. This led to a year of isolation, fear and harassment.

> For the entire year, I never went to the canteen. When I was walking in the corridor I heard people whisper and laugh and I knew they were talking about me. I had to stop going to PE, I was worried if anything would happen to me it would be there. The idea of going to PE gave me panic attacks.

> I would look at my phone and see all the hurtful messages, they would use the T slur, call me a shemale, say I'll never be a girl . . .

Through support from her mother, some teachers at her school and a positive experience at the gifted program that summer, Olivia chose to "officially" come out at school the following year, reclaiming this important aspect of the LGBTQ+ identity development journey for herself.

> For the entire summer I got to be myself and that was amazing. Then the principal and deputy principal had a meeting with my mother and it was decided my name and gender could be changed on the roll, which was great. I didn't want my class to be told while I was there, so they told them on a day I was at a course. In fairness to my form class, right away there were very few mistakes, people were really nice about it, which I didn't expect!

Identity rejection – internal and external struggles

Identity rejection can be experienced by gifted LGBTQ+ adolescents on an internal level, in terms of feelings of otherness, suppression and denial. Externally, gifted LGBTQ+ adolescents may feel rejection from peers, through exclusion, isolation and harassment as a result of their identity.

For questionnaire participants, identity rejection was predominantly described through negative experiences with peers. In particular, the presence of anti-LGBTQ+ language was identified, in its use as a tool of rejection. Negative language is a key predictor of a negative climate for LGBTQ+ adolescents, in its direct use (name-calling, used as an insult) and its indirect use, as a way to affirm in-group and out-group identity, where heterosexuality is the norm and anything other should be rejected (Farrelly et al., 2017). Overall, 60% of questionnaire participants stated they heard negative remarks about being gay frequently or often at school, while 50% heard negative language about being LGBTQ+ frequently or often. The examples given included slurs, using LGBTQ+ terms in a pejorative way ("the word transgender being used as an insult"), general discrimination ("spreading rumours about people being gay as a way to disenfranchise them"), emotions of disgust toward LGBTQ+ people ("calling them perverts/

paedophiles") and deliberating misgendering transgender people. This routine use of anti-LGBTQ+ language creates a space of rejection for gifted LGBTQ+ adolescents, which affects positive identity development. One questionnaire participant wrote the following.

> Comments like "that's so gay" were a part of daily life. Slurs were frequently used by boys and you would hear it just walking through the corridors. Students who were out as LGBTQ+ were treated differently and mocked behind their backs. I would never in a million years feel comfortable being out at secondary school.

The majority of interview participants described experiences of rejection, both internal and external. Of all interviewees, Suzie described the most internal struggle in coming to terms with her identity, engaging in strategies of denial and repression while in school.

> I thought maybe I'm not straight? Immediately I thought no, I have to be straight. I had to immediately lock that thought down. So I didn't even consider it for basically my whole secondary school experience. It just couldn't be an option for me because of the environment of the school.

While most participants spoke in greater detail about rejection in terms of their LGBTQ+ identity, Jackie described how giftedness, gender norms and sexual orientation all combined for her in her frustration with school.

> The girls were under a lot of social pressure to fit feminine standards. I didn't fit those standards, because I rejected them. But I also couldn't fit them because of how high achieving I was academically. Me being gay gave me the freedom and less pressure to be seen as passive and feminine. [The other girls] would not talk to any of the boys, they would all be very quiet in class ... It was also things like the school announced who did the best in the [standardised tests], so I kind of couldn't escape being seen as academically high achieving.

Jackie states she "rejected" the standards set but she also felt she couldn't fit them in the first place, by virtue of her academic abilities. Jackie's choice of how to act was essentially removed from the situation, as the school announced the standardized test results, directly revealing her academic status to her peers.

For Joe, one of the most significant challenges to his identity development was being urged to "tone it down" in terms of being queer at school. Joe recalled one experience of rejection from a teacher, which he found especially frustrating.

> I really wanted to put myself out there. I did debating so there was a level I could be performative there, but my school never had a drama club or anything. I remember a fashion design competition and I told the teacher I really want to model this and I would do a good job. She said you can't model it because first of all what are people going to think and second no one is going to vote if it's a man in a dress. She thought she had my best interests at heart but in retrospect, that's just homophobic.

Identity affirmation – community and confidence

Identity affirmation was identified by participants as coming through multiple contexts and also as an internal and external concept. The most significant force of affirmation came from developing and being present in LGBTQ+ supportive communities, which increased confidence and positively impacted identity development.

When asked about support from peers and staff, questionnaire participants gave quite different answers in respect of school and the gifted program. Participants described the gifted program as having an overall more positive climate for gifted LGBTQ+ students, with the overwhelming majority stating that both peers (95.8%) and staff (88%) were "very" supportive. In comparison, only half of participants (50.7%) felt that peers were "somewhat" supportive, with slightly less (40.1%) reporting school staff as supportive. For several questionnaire participants, the gifted program had a positive effect on their self-perception and emotions around being LGBTQ+.

> I started [gifted programme] as queerphobic and transphobic, and I left it queer and trans! Maybe not every corner was welcoming and positive, but as a queer kid I was able to find others like me and it was nurturing/encouraging enough that I felt able to explore my identity. It was significantly better than any other environment I had at that age.

Several interview participants spoke of the increased confidence they felt when their identity was supported for the first time at the gifted program specifically, by both peers and staff leaders. Olivia spoke about how her positive experience helped her regain confidence, which she took back with her to school.

> That first year at the gifted programme, it was so exciting. Being in a girls residential group straight away, my name being Olivia, that was amazing. Those two weeks were some of the most important … I'd say arguably the two most important weeks of my life.

Shortly after this, Olivia came out on her own accord at school (as discussed in the previous section) and was further encouraged by a teacher to take part in a school musical. Olivia was cast as one of the leading female roles, which had a longer term positive impact, as it directly contributed to her decision to study drama at university.

Similarly, Joe experienced significant benefits from his experience at the gifted program, discussing how it encouraged him to stand up for others.

> I felt like there wasn't a whole lot I could do to express my queerness in school and it wasn't until I met other gifted queer people that I realised actually people should just be okay with this. It empowered me to speak up, not only can I be myself around these people but I'm sure as hell going to stand up for them because they're my friends.

Discussion

As discussed, contemporary adolescents are increasingly using an expanded vocabulary to describe their gender and sexual identities (Hammack et al., 2021; Russell et al., 2009). This increase in the breadth of identifiers being used could be attributed to societal changes, greater knowledge of individual identities and an openness to multiple, or even a total lack of, labels. The inclusion of the open text box in this study for participants to identify their gender and sexual orientation led to some extremely interesting findings. Some of the identifiers recorded in the questionnaire were new even to this author's (fairly strong) knowledge of LGBTQ+ identities. Overall 14 unique gender identities and 17 unique sexual orientation labels were recorded. For gender, the

identity with the highest response was cisgender female. For non cisgender identities, nonbinary had the highest number of responses. Cisgender individuals may be more likely to have binary views of gender, or at least view themselves within a binary, whereas individuals who do not identify as cisgender may consider gender as more of a spectrum and can therefore gravitate toward a sexual orientation not dependant on a binary system (Garrett-Walker & Montagno, 2021). As discussed in an earlier section, some participants in this study wanted to separate themselves entirely from any type of preconceived ideas of gender or rigid labels.

> I just don't want anything associated with it [gender]…
> The [idea that] nonbinary is specifically a third gender or something that can exist within a spectrum between male and female, is kind of just restrictive as it was in the first place. It's another set of stereotypes that people have in their head… I just want to deconstruct the whole thing entirely. - Dillon

Gender norms were also a challenge. The quote from Jackie where she describes being unable to fit the feminine standards at her school due to being gay and academic is also relevant here, as her decision on how to act was essentially forced due to the school's announcement of standardized test results. While Jackie states that she outright rejected the gender norms at her school, she also was left with little choice. Gender norms also affected Dillon and Steven, as each of their experiences were also impacted by their socialization as female, before coming out as teenagers.

The study's findings were largely consistent with previous studies on gifted LGBTQ+ young people, in terms of overall identity development themes. Being LGBTQ+, along with related challenges of being gifted, can affect the social and emotional development of adolescents (Peterson and Rischar, 2000). Similarly, participants in this study expressed social difficulties at school, difficulty coming to terms with their identity and having divergent interests from their peers. Social fears can have a significant effect on identity development for gifted LGBTQ+ young people (Tuite et al., 2021) in particular fear of rejection on coming out, alienation, prejudice and harassment. Coming out, which is often

seen as a key milestone in the development of LGBTQ+ identities (Savin-Williams, 1998), was a mixed experience for study participants. However, one aspect was especially clear – that gifted LGBTQ+ adolescents must be given the time and space to come out, in a positive environment, and of their own volition. Hutcheson and Tieso (2014) found that some of the gifted LGBTQ+ participants in their study considered whether to disclose or hide being LGBTQ+ as an intellectual problem, which could be solved by examining the "data" of the situation. The framework of visibility (Cross, 1997; Cross et al., 1991) is relevant to this challenge, as gifted LGBTQ+ students must choose whether to hide and deny, or express and embrace, their identity/identities (Hutcheson & Tieso, 2014; Kerr & Huffman, 2018). Suzie's experience spoke the most closely to this, as she described her "dual life," avoiding telling her friends from school that she is attending LGBTQ+ university events because she is part of the society.

Gifted LGBTQ+ adolescents may develop disparate personal and private personas (Stewart, 2006), which the author identified in terms of two participants' use of social media as an identity management technique. Olivia had two separate social media presences before she came out and Suzie spoke about avoiding it altogether, which keeps her identity compartmentalized for the two friend groups. Adolescents may fear losing their social support networks if they disclose their LGBTQ+ identity (D'Augelli et al., 2002; Diamond & Lucas, 2004; Gato et al., 2020). Peers are an important source of support for LGBTQ+ youths, particularly friends who are also LGBTQ+, as they could understand the issues they were experiencing (Roe, 2017). Being among gifted peers can also provide a sense of belonging, shared interests and increased ability to communicate effectively (Reidl Cross et al., 2019). Several participants mentioned the value of friends in their lives, in particular, those they met through the gifted summer program.

> I've never had more of a social life than at camp. Like outside of it I was friendly with people but I didn't have friends. - Benedict

> I think that if I had not met gifted kids and not made a significant number of queer friends and just went through the whole secondary experience and that was my life for six years, I would have gone insane. - Joe

Leadership plays a significant role in the creation of a positive environment for LGBTQ+ young people. One of the strongest predictors of a less hostile school climate, and greater self-esteem for LGBTQ+ students, is the number of supportive educators within a school (Kosciw et al., 2013). This was evident in participant's discussions around the positive environment created by staff at the gifted program, as well as the presence of other gifted LGBTQ+ peers. The creation of this type of atmosphere is incredibly important for gifted LGBTQ+ adolescents, as positive identity affirmation can moderate the link between experiences of interpersonal victimization and depression for LGBTQ+ young people (Busby et al., 2020), even during short periods like a summer camp (Gillig & Bighash, 2021).

Participants discussed practical strategies that could create a more inclusive and affirming environment. Visibility plays a significant role in the building of a positive environment for gifted LGBTQ+ young people, which can be achieved through mentorship and leadership which is clear in its support. Two questionnaire participants emphasized this, in terms of staff and peers.

> Nothing better than queer staff when it comes to showing up for queer students!

> The gifted program was my first interaction with children my own age that identified as LGBTQ+ which in turn taught me more about the LGBTQ+ experience that I think I could have learned in a classroom.

Several participants in this study returned to the gifted organization to work as part-time staff members, citing their desire to recreate the support they received as a student. Other crucial components of a positive environment are proud allies who create an inclusive classroom through physical signifiers (such as LGBTQ+ posters, rainbow flags), foster insightful discussion and condemn all instances of anti-LGBTQ+ language. This visibility in the "real world" is something which multiple participants found deeply profound, citing the presence of other gifted queer peers and staff as essential to their positive identity development.

Conclusion

The present study of the experiences of gifted LGBTQ+ adolescents has several aims; to contribute empirical research to the small (but growing) field of gifted LGBTQ+ research, to provide this research from a new context (namely outside the United States) and to utilize transformative theory to link results of social inquiry to action. While this was a mixed methods study, the qualitative data presented offers significant insight into the lives of gifted LGBTQ+ young people. One of the most important aspects of this study was age, as the mean participant age (18.4) is the youngest of all other gifted LGBTQ+ studies which focused on a group (Hutcheson & Tieso, 2014; Lo et al., 2021; Tuite et al., 2021; Wikoff et al., 2021). Participants were either current students or very recent graduates of post-primary school and the gifted program referenced, which increased the clarity of their recall of experiences. Overall, the study found that several factors contributed to a positive environment for gifted LGBTQ+ students; support for self-identification, positive peer relationships and supportive leadership. Each of these elements affirmed participants and empowered them within their identity.

Further study is crucial in this area. The field would benefit from research on a wider variety of experience, within different countries, cultural contexts and with additional demographic data which allows for a richer understanding of the lives of gifted LGBTQ+ adolescents.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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